

REPORT

CALIFORNIA SCHOOL BOARDS

NAVIGATING DEMOCRACY IN DIVIDED TIMES

SEPTEMBER 2025

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Introduction

Local school boards have historically played a major role in the function and character of U.S. schools by providing fiscal oversight, shaping policy, and creating avenues for community voice, representation, and accountability (Briggs & Buenrostro, 2017; Tyack, 1974; Wirt & Kirst, 2005). As such, school boards have regularly served as critical sites for political struggle and public discourse on a range of issues (e.g., school integration, teaching of evolution) (Frankenberg & Diem, 2015; Slack, 2007), at times perpetuating inequity, and at others challenging it. In early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, partisan politics increasingly seeped into school board meetings and elections (Schueler, Miller, & Reynolds, 2025; Singer et al., 2025; Valant, 2020). This was particularly true regarding decisions about mask mandates, vaccine requirements, and school reopenings. During this period, school boards also came into the media spotlight as local sites for national culture wars including issues related to the teaching of race and racism, LGBTQ+ issues, book bans, etc. (Brookings, 2021; Collins, 2023; Kogan, 2022; Polikoff et al., 2022; Rogers et al., 2022; Walsh, 2024; White et al., 2023). Growing demands on schools (Casserly, 2024), rapid advancements in technology (Kahne et al., 2016; Nelson et al., 2017), political extremism (Rogers et al., 2024), and well-coordinated attacks on public education (Pappano, 2024) are now further testing the capacity, legitimacy, and purpose of these democratic institutions. An increase in recall elections, uncontested races, and board turnover are all manifestations of the current strains on boards.

Results from the 2024 presidential and congressional elections and recent executive actions suggest that contentious debates regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion in education, LGBTQ+ students' rights, and the role of parents and families in educational decision-making will continue to play out at the local level, most likely within K-12 school boards (Peetz, 2025). President Trump and Republican majorities in Congress have committed to dismantling the federal Department of Education and shifting resource allocation and decision-making to state and local education authorities (Fensterwald et al., 2025). Relatedly, uncertainty around federal funding cuts and declining enrollment in many districts has only heightened pressures facing school systems and their leaders. While public education has always been inherently political, today's landscape is unique with the stark national political divides and polarization (Brezicha et al., 2023; Duarte & Fernandez, 2025; Houston, 2024; LoBue & Douglass, 2023).

Past studies have demonstrated the ways in which local educational politics have shifted alongside an influx of national issues and, correspondingly, more competitive, partisan board elections and increased campaign spending (Reckhow et al., 2017). Others have documented the complexities of school board decisions in the pandemic years (Kitchens & Goldberg, 2024; Marsh et al., 2022). Still other scholars have examined the responses of parents, educators, and district leaders to the new political environment (Jochim et al., 2023; Polikoff et al., 2022; Woo et al., 2022; White et al., 2023). Yet there is relatively little research on school board members' experiences in this climate (for exceptions, see Knight-Abowitz, 2025; Sampson, 2025).

Given the current sociopolitical context and the important role boards play in local education, there is a need among educational researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to better understand how school boards are responding to the shifting context, specifically the challenges they are facing, and the supports they may need to ensure the promise of robust, locally governed public education systems. This report offers insights from a multi-case study of 10 school board members serving in 2023–2024 within a variety of diverse school districts in California — a state that grants substantial authority to school boards under its Local Control Funding Formula finance and accountability framework¹ and that is marked by considerable geographic, political, and racial/ethnic diversity. The primary research question guiding this study was: *How are school board members experiencing and negotiating rapidly changing political and social contexts?* More specifically, in this report, we examine two subquestions:

1. How do school board members understand their role and the role of the board?
2. What challenges do school board members face, and what strategies do they use to navigate them?

To answer these questions we rely on four data sources: 1) interviews (two, 60–90 minute interviews at the start and end of the study); 2) “audio diaries” using the secure messaging application Voxer approximately every 2–3 weeks, in which participants recorded audio responses to prompts which asked them to reflect on various themes and questions²; 3) one board meeting observation for 5 of the members (due to anonymity concerns we did not conduct observations for the two small rural district members); and 4) information from websites and media. To arrive at the findings herein, we first coded all transcripts and meeting notes, met regularly, and wrote memos summarizing findings and themes emerging across the 10 participants. We also shared preliminary findings on two webinars with participants (who participated anonymously) to elicit feedback and ensure these results accurately reflected the experiences they shared with us.

This report is organized into two sections. The first section focuses on how school board members understand their individual roles as well as the collective role of the school board. After identifying the primary purpose and roles they emphasized, we move to the heart of the report, which centers on the challenges that members faced as they sought to enact these roles and highlight some strategies that members used to navigate them. In this second section, we identify seven common challenges, including how to navigate complex relationships, time constraints, limited capacity, the influence of technology, demands to use data, political dynamics, and state policies. We conclude with a series of practical implications for strengthening school boards and local governance.

¹ The Local Control Funding Formula is a 2013 education reform in California that, in addition to allocating base funding for all districts, targets additional funds to districts serving high proportions of low-income students, homeless or foster youth, and English language learners. Replacing many “earmarked” categorical funding streams with new LCFF funds, the reform also provides local education agencies (LEAs) with greater local autonomy to use state funding to meet students’ needs. LCFF also requires LEAs to include school communities in the development of their Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) detailing how funds will be used to improve outcomes for all students and especially those targeted by the additional LCFF funds. LCAPs must be formally adopted by school boards.

² Due to time constraints and technical challenges, in four cases, school board members completed all five prompts in a live video-conference interview in which they responded to all five questions at one time. To simulate the audio diary process the researcher recorded the session with minimal interaction with the school board member.

Broadly speaking, school board members (SBMs) in our study offered a wide range of experiences and perspectives, representing urban, rural, and suburban school districts across the state. In contrast to the often sensationalized media reports on combative and dysfunctional school boards, our findings illustrate the day-to-day experiences of K-12 school boards in a broad range of communities throughout California. Our research highlights the growing challenges that school board members face in navigating this current context, particularly as community members and board members often bring divergent perspectives and expectations regarding the role and responsibilities of K-12 school boards. As a result, this report calls for a more deliberate conversation about the role of school boards in a rapidly changing American society with significant implications for educational policy and governance, and in turn, the schooling experiences of millions of students and families in public schools.

Study Sample

Our study draws from the experiences of 10 board members who were purposely recruited to capture a diversity of perspectives and local contexts. We recruited participants through direct outreach (“cold emails”) and referrals from educators with whom we had existing relationships (they were not informed of which individuals ultimately enrolled in the study). As illustrated in **Table 1**, the participating members came from districts varying in size, location, and context (e.g., rural, suburban, urban; partisan context). Though not illustrated, the districts also varied in the structure of their board elections, with 3 running district-wide elections for at-large seats and 7 being elected by trustee area. The participants also differed in gender identity, age, race/ethnicity, occupation, and years of experience in their role. Additionally, we tried to engage with board members across a political spectrum, including registered Democrats and Republicans, independents, and self-identified non-partisan board members. Our goal was not to select a sample or generate findings that are generalizable to all school boards across California, but instead to bring together a diverse set of individuals whose experiences and perspectives could bring greater nuance to our understanding of local democracy and governance in education. To maintain their anonymity, we use pseudonyms for the participants and provide only broad details about their backgrounds and districts.

TABLE 1: Participant and District Demographic Information

School Board Member	District Urbanicity	District Enrollment	% Non-White Enrollment	% Economically Disadvantaged Enrollment	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Age	Years Served	Community Political Leaning
Morgan	Midsize City	>20,000	70%–90%	20%–50%	F	Asian	<35	New	Solid Dem
Taylor	Small City	>20,000	70%–90%	20%–50%	M	White	35–50	Exp.	Dem Leaning
Jordan	Large Suburban	2,000–5,000	70%–90%	<20%	M	Asian	35–50	Exp.	Strong Dem
Alex	Large Suburban	5,000–10,000	70%–90%	<20%	M	Multiracial	<35	Exp.	Strong Dem
Mia	Large Suburban	10,000–20,000	>90%	>80%	F	Hispanic	>50	Exp.	Solid Dem
Miguel	Large Suburban	5,000–10,000	>90%	>80%	M	Hispanic	35–50	Exp.	Strong Dem
Riley	Midsize City	10,000–20,000	70%–90%	20%–50%	F	Black	35–50	Exp.	Strong Dem
Parker	Rural	<2,000	50%–70%	20%–50%	F	White	35–50	New	Rep Leaning
Dana	Large Suburban	2,000–5,000	50%–70%	<20%	M	Hispanic	>50	Exp.	Strong Dem
Charlie	Rural	<2,000	50%–70%	50%–80%	F	White	>50	Vet.	Strong Rep

Note: Years Served: New = 1 year or less; Experienced = 1–5; Veteran = >5. Ranges used to protect anonymity. Source: ed-data.org (2022–23). Community political leaning was determined based on data from the winning margin for the most recently available presidential election (NYTimes, n.d.). Strong Dem/Strong Rep = margin of >30%, Solid Dem/Solid Rep = margin of 15%–29%, Dem/Rep Leaning = margin of 1%–14%.

The Role of School Boards and School Board Members

How Board Members Understand the Role of School Boards

The California School Boards Association lays out a set of key roles and responsibilities for school boards in their governance resources (California School Boards Association, n.d.). These roles and responsibilities include:

- Setting direction for the community's schools
- Establishing an effective and efficient structure for the school district
- Creating a supportive environment
- Ensuring accountability to the public
- Providing community leadership as advocates for children, the school district, and public schools

When asked about the role of the school board, most SBMs in our study consistently shared a similar list of responsibilities. In fact, some board members' answers aligned with the CSBA-outlined list verbatim. They also discussed other practices as important to their roles, including:

- Community engagement, primarily through board meetings
- Hiring and firing superintendents
- Supporting superintendents and district staff
- Fiduciary duties, including managing the budget
- Labor relations
- Curricular and academic decisions, especially textbook approval

A majority of board members also discussed the growing importance of managing crises and public relations, insulating the district from outside political pressures, following the law to avoid litigation, and implementing non-academic state legislation. Although none of these are completely outside of the historical purview of school boards, participants explained that these newer board responsibilities often overshadowed other components of the board's role, and in some cases, became the primary role. Importantly, not all of these non-traditional roles were perceived negatively. For example, board members positively described supporting students and families by listening to concerns and bringing them to district staff (especially the superintendent), as well as setting high-level policies and goals for the district. Riley explained:

We have board and community workshops when we go to particular sites ... for example, when the Boys and Girls Club lets out kids, and their parents are picking them up. There's dinner and childcare provided, and then parents are encouraged to stay and chat with us for a little bit about a particular topic.

While acknowledging the importance of listening to community members and elevating their concerns to district leadership, board members also recognized “role creep” or differing opinions on the proper role of the board as compared to that of the superintendent. Miguel explained that he regularly shared with families that “I don’t have the authority to direct staff to do something. And even collectively, as the board, that’s generally not what we do because we’re not there to micromanage the staff.” Instead, he relied on legal guidance to delineate the role of the board, sharing, “There’s specific ed code about what [our] responsibilities are, and what constitutes interference.”

How Board Members Understand Their Own Roles

When describing how they understood their roles as individual board members, some participants highlighted the benefits of having different areas of expertise on the board and how they often took on informal roles related to their professional expertise (e.g., an accountant reviewing the budget or a lawyer focusing on the legal responsibilities). While all board members were expected to understand their required duties, one board member shared:

I think that we all have a lane, and it’s very clear that my lane and where I excel is how this message can be communicated to the public and [being] in the community talking about the work that we’re doing ... Some members will read all 600 pages of the budget, every line. That’s not me. ... So I am of the belief that we all have a specific role, and that’s what makes the governing body so strong ... [Y]ou have the person who will look at every page, you have the person who communicates with the unions, the person to communicate with the staff, the person communicating with the press, the person who is in with all the sites ... We should be working hand in hand to be a very strong force.

Though individuals served in various “lanes,” they generally mobilized their expertise in service of a higher purpose as a board member. Our analysis found four primary ways that school board members articulated their role on the board: 1) The Changemaker, 2) The Champion, 3) The Rule Follower, and 4) The Representative (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: Typology of Board Member Roles

CHANGEMAKER	Functions as a catalyst for change in the ways the board or district functions; advocates for new policies and programs to address perceived inequities or negative outcomes.
CHAMPION	Advocates for, supports, and protects the district , superintendent/ staff, and existing policies and structures; proactively works to maintain a positive district image and reputation .
RULE FOLLOWER	Focuses primarily on ensuring school and board district consistently adhere to existing policies, laws, and government mandates .
REPRESENTATIVE	Advocates for constituents and groups within the district community (e.g., students families, educators, taxpayers, etc.).

As **Table 2** illustrates, these roles were not mutually exclusive, as several board members expressed behaviors and beliefs that were aligned with multiple roles (e.g., Taylor as a Champion and Representative). Importantly, **all** board members aligned with the Representative role, albeit with differing ideas about *who* they represented and *why*. Even when board members articulated multiple roles, throughout our data collection, they generally emphasized one or two as what we deemed their “primary” roles (indicated with a larger checkmark in Table 2). We will refer to these primary roles throughout the remainder of the report.

In what follows, we describe these four categories by establishing how the 10 school board members saw themselves in their roles. These conceptualizations set the foundation for the remainder of the report, as we trace their efforts to enact these roles and the challenges they encounter along the way.

TABLE 2: How Case Study Board Members Understood Their Roles

Participant	Changemaker	Representative	Champion	Rule Follower
Morgan				
Taylor				
Jordan				
Alex				
Mia				
Miguel				
Riley				
Parker				
Dana				
Charlie				

Note: The check mark sizes denote the extent to which a school board member embodies the roles of participants: Changemaker, Representative, Champion, and Rule Follower. A large check mark indicates that the role was central to the beliefs and practices of the participant as a school board member. A medium-sized check mark indicates that the school board member consistently embodied the role, albeit moderately. A small check mark indicates that the school board member embodied some of the associated beliefs and behaviors of their role.

The Changemaker

School board members who the research team identified as Changemakers (Morgan, Jordan, Alex, Mia, Riley, Parker) often questioned the status quo within the school board and sought to use their role as an opportunity to make strategic and enduring changes within their board. For example, Riley explained:

We’re not just going to sit up here on this dais and talk about all the things that we want to do. We’re actually going to do something, and we’re actually going to change outcomes for kids and the trajectory of what that looks like.

A key strategy in achieving those kinds of changes involved questioning the status quo within the district. As Mia shared, “I am definitely perceived as the one that asks a lot of the tougher questions.”

Riley described using this strategy to shift how her school board engaged in data-driven decision-making:

*I’ll never forget in one of [the meetings], probably in the first year, where we’re having the presentation on our LCAP [Local Control and Accountability Plan]. I was asking questions like “We have this program. How do we know if it works? You’re asking me to approve spending more money on this?” “Well, we can’t tell you because we...” You **can** tell me ... you [just] don’t have the data. You’re not tracking it. You’re not seeing which students received this intervention, and as a result of that intervention, am I seeing progress here and tracking that over time?”*

After being the board member who asked the tough questions for some time, she described significant growth within her board: “I recently sat in a meeting, and everyone else was asking the data questions. I was like, ‘I don’t need to ask them anymore. You guys are asking.’ I was like, ‘Oh, this is amazing!’”

Yet some Changemaker SBMs reported some negative aspects of pushing for changes, including feeling alone or ostracized, and the amount of time and capacity that it took to make tangible change. Morgan shared, “I kind of feel like I’m doing [this] alone right now.” She went on to describe how pushing for change required time and capacity that was often at odds with the demands of home life, children, and employment, explaining: “I think at a different point in life I ... had more time and capacity, [and] this is something I would have loved to have taken on and really run with.” Feeling disappointed by the slow pace of change and frequent opposition was commonly shared among Changemaker SBMs, as Jordan concluded that change was “hard to accomplish” and that they were “exhausted.”

Changemaker board members often came to board service with either an implicit or explicitly stated political alignment (i.e., self-identified progressives, independents, and conservatives). While these distinctions did appear to be related to a few specific policies (such as restorative justice), more notably, many Changemaker board members felt at times they were at odds with other SBMs over district priorities. Jordan noted, “You start to realize that consensus building might be harder than you think. Even on a board that was politically all of the same party, there can be quite a bit of difference in terms of your ideas or perspectives.” As a result, Changemaker board members were quick to point out that consensus-building, while challenging, was typically key to achieving their goals.

The Champion

Three SBMs (Taylor, Mia, and Charlie) in our study were characterized by a Champion, or protector, attitude towards their board service. In this role, SBMs described using their position to advance the goals of the district, at times working to promote and celebrate the district’s successes. Taylor explained that he generally tried to affirm the work of the superintendent and district staff, noting, “I like to use my public comment to be positive toward the people that are ... doing the actual work of education and education management.” Some board members also viewed their role as protecting

the district from outside interference, sometimes including parents, or protecting students and families from perceived negative policies. For example, Charlie described her initial priority as a board member as ensuring students' physical safety. She explained:

My initial priority was the safety of the schools. I think Sandy Hook had just happened, and having small children ... that was my initial [thought] ... Are we safe enough? Are we doing everything we can do to make sure our kids here are safe? It was a scary time.

Most Champion SBMs also believed that it was important to publicly support the district administration. Like Taylor above, Mia believed that a significant part of her role was to support the superintendent and their cabinet. She explained, "Some folks might say 'No, you should be critical.' [But] my job is to support them because theoretically, this superintendent is following the directions that we set."

Champion SBMs also described feeling a need to insulate the district from national politics (e.g., Critical Race Theory in schools, anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric). For example, Charlie recalled learning from the district's previous experiences with COVID-era school board meetings to proactively shield the district from a similar experience:

So there had been a little pocket of parents that kind of got all riled up, and we knew they were coming to the board meeting. So the superintendent and I just hashed it out. We lost control during COVID, and I wasn't going to let that happen again, because we were on the verge of losing our superintendent. You know, she just didn't feel supported. And I didn't blame her. We weren't supporting her ... So this time, I wanted to be prepared, and I wanted to be able to support her and our administration and what they were doing and how they were following laws.

Jordan, who primarily identified as a Changemaker, noted that it would not be surprising to find many Champions on boards, as superintendents often recruit individuals who will not "rock the boat" and bring unwavering support and stability to their work. Equating the former "super volunteer" to one that serves in this "cheerleading" role on the board, he explained:

I meet board members that are ... like the super volunteer. ... I think superintendents like the former because this is someone who loves the school as a cheerleader for the schools. And that's the person I can rely upon. They're not going to rock the boat. They're going to allow me to do my job. They're not going to question me. And anytime I put something forward, they're right behind me. That is a superintendent's dream, right? I think for me, I see it as ... the opposite. I think that leads to complacency, it leads to stagnation, and leads to sort of just continuing to do what you do and assume things are working.

Though acknowledging the value of a board member who has spent time on campuses, Jordan cautioned against the cheerleader as someone who contributes to the maintenance of the status quo.

The Rule Follower

SBMs characterized as Rule Followers (Morgan, Miguel, Dana) emphasized the importance of aligning with a set of policies and procedures, which allowed them to maintain fairness in challenging situations and set limits when faced with outside pressures. “I’m a real stickler for the rules,” Miguel noted, “And I’m a big stickler for following the process that’s in place.” In instances of challenge, following the rules provided this SBM with predictability and fairness in dealing with situations as they arose: “So I make it a point to set the example to when somebody comes to me, you know that I know what my duties are as a trustee and where the limits lie.”

Most SBMs acknowledged that limitations set by the public meeting laws included in the Brown Act (see box below and later section on policy and structural constraints for further discussion of this policy), made it difficult to address issues quickly. However, Rule Followers felt that these policies also set guardrails that ensured procedural fairness and, equally importantly, the *perception* of fairness by the public. For example, Miguel explained:

This is the more frequent occurrence where the individual doesn’t understand the process of appealing something or getting something addressed, so they just come directly to the board. More often than not, when that happens, we’ll thank them for the comments and ask them to come in and see the superintendent, get contact information from them so we can follow up, and try to address their situation, because you want to address everything at the lowest level. You know, you don’t want everything to just be escalated right away to the Board of Trustees. ... You know, we’re ultimately the governing body, but there’s always a process before it gets to us.

The Brown Act Explained

The Ralph M. Brown Act is a California law that establishes the guidelines and parameters for transparency in how public officials make decisions. Originally passed in 1953, the Brown Act applies to local legislative bodies such as K-12 school boards, city councils, and county boards of supervisors. Key provisions include requirements for meetings to be open to the public, provide advanced notice of meeting agendas, facilitate opportunities for public participation, disclose individually recorded votes that occur in public, and abide by limits on what can be discussed in closed sessions.

Some board members also advocated for strictly adhering to rules and procedures, raising concerns that other board members who pushed radical changes to district policies and priorities ended up alienating families and creating new challenges for the district. In describing the need to adhere to the rules, Dana shared, “I’m going to follow the rules. ... The problem is I don’t think board members see themselves as lawmakers; they see themselves as activists.” The distinction between being a lawmaker

and an activist was important, as these board members believed that acting at the edge of what was permitted by law ultimately put students, families, and tax dollars at risk. “The bottom line,” said Dana, “is I wouldn’t do anything in the district that puts us in jeopardy. I wouldn’t do anything illegal.”

Ultimately, rule-following SBMs believed that district policies and procedures existed for a reason and set their attention to improving those rules, rather than trying to work around them. For example, Dana shared:

I believe in the process. The outcome I don’t necessarily believe in, but when the outcome goes against me, for instance, when I’m voted four to one against. Well, my fellow board members in their experience in their elected positions ... they’ve decided to do this. I said my piece, and now I have to work within the dynamics that I’m given, and that’s what it means to be a good board member. I can’t be oppositional. Once the decision’s made, that’s the policy.

In reference to a challenging situation faced by the district, Miguel felt that despite not getting the resolution he wanted, he was proud the board followed its own procedures and even improved on them: “I think that that even though the vote on the policy change didn’t go the way I thought it should have gone, the points I made on process and how this should be handled in the future, were well taken by two other trustees, and that we’ve now given direction to the superintendent on how we’re going to handle that in the future.” For both Miguel and Dana, following the rules helped mediate conflict — if the majority voted one way, those in the minority had to accept it even if they did not agree with it.

The Representative

Lastly, three board members (Morgan, Jordan, Parker) explicitly emphasized the importance of their role as Representatives to their communities. While nearly all SBMs understood that as elected officials, they represented a specific constituency, these SBMs felt that the responsibility to serve that community extended well beyond an electoral mandate. They often alluded to their own experiences as community members and felt that they needed to understand that community by listening and embedding themselves within it to best serve their members.

For example, Morgan talked about actively looking for opportunities to understand her community better. “I think that something that I wanted to make sure that I understood a little bit better,” she noted, “was about how my district was serving students with special needs, and ... also coming from an immigrant community ... households [with] English learners.” By listening to community members during board meetings, taking parent concerns seriously, and discussing community concerns with the superintendent, Morgan believed she could better represent her constituents, especially those who she felt could benefit from additional support from the district.

Similarly, Jordan argued that his job was to be the “eyes and ears” of the community, and bring their concerns to the superintendent: “So I think a school board’s job is to observe and support, and direct the work of the superintendent and the cabinet that then flows downwards. I think our role is to serve as the eyes and ears of the community ... and to be able to bring new voices and perspectives to our deliberations.”

Representative SBMs also discussed the importance of a balanced budget, responsible spending, and being a fiduciary of public funds. For these SBMs, district boundaries mattered, and the legal obligation of the district to follow their public mandate for taxpayers in that boundary was a serious concern. “But you know, it’s a fiduciary act,” Taylor concluded. “[I follow] the idea of being a steward of public funds to provide this public good to every student within your boundary. That’s regardless of their circumstance.” This SBM — who served in a district with regional not at-large seats — was quick to point out that although this duty emerged from their electoral mandate, once elected he had to put these electoral boundaries aside and work as one: “When I say by boundary, I mean the district boundary, so once elected, we all work as a board of one and all our we don’t differentiate between students in the elected areas.”

Building on this understanding of how board members viewed their roles, we next examine the challenges they encountered in putting those roles into practice.

Challenges and Strategies

All SBMs in our study understood that their role came with a variety of challenges, many of which were commonly shared. Through our analysis of these experiences, we also identified numerous strategies and recommendations they offered for navigating these challenges. In this section, we describe these challenges and highlight example strategies for addressing them.

FIGURE 2: Seven Key Challenges Facing Board Members



Throughout this section of the report, we highlight several strategies that board members used to address these challenges, while also emphasizing how conceptions of their roles (e.g., Champion, Changemaker, Rule Follower, Representative) influence how they develop and enact such strategies.

CHALLENGE #1

Navigating Complex Relationships



SUMMARY: Participants regularly described the importance of managing complex relationships with key interest-holders (e.g., community members, superintendents, fellow board members) and how these relationships influenced — and often constrained — their ability to accomplish individual and board goals.

As public officials, school board members are regularly tasked with building relationships with a wide range of internal (e.g., teachers, families, students) and external (business leaders, municipal officials, advocacy organizations) interest-holders (Bridgeforth & White, 2025). These relationships are often built in public venues such as school board meetings, but are also maintained through a variety of engagement strategies (Reimer, 2015). In turn, board members can ideally leverage these relationships to collectively advance district goals and priorities. Consistent with this research, participants in our study regularly noted the importance and challenges of maintaining strong interpersonal relationships.

SBMs in our study were quick to point out the relational aspects of their roles, meaning that a large part of their efforts were devoted to managing relationships with their superintendents, their community, and with other board members. This was unsurprising given that all of the SBMs embraced a Representative role, which by nature requires board members to regularly connect with constituents to understand their needs and preferences. As Miguel explained:

I'm on a five-member board, but my school district covers [multiple] cities ... So I have to ensure that I have some semblance of a relationship with 30 other people, at minimum, to try to get anything done.

This reality often proved challenging for board members as they sought to balance many relationships with interest-holders across their district communities that at times were competing or incongruent. For example, Alex, who strongly aligned with a Changemaker identity and, to a lesser extent, a Representative, recalled:

It's hard because we are responsive to the people who vote for us. And so this large group of people coming can often feel like that is a majority of the constituents. Even if it's 20, 30 people ... when meetings are usually empty, 30 people to school board members who are used to seeing no one seems like a lot, even though it may not be reflective of the entire constituency as a whole.

Yet board members readily recognized that building relationships and listening to the different voices within their district communities was a key part of their roles as elected officials. Riley, another Changemaker, noted:

It's like you're trying to really, authentically, both build the relationships and hear what people have to say. Like what's working? What's not working? And how can I help? And you can't fix everything ... And you might not agree with everything everyone's saying, but at least that authentic listening and people feeling like someone's listening to them and cares what they have to say.

Similarly, Miguel explained that “everyone has their own personality and that you’ve got to work with them. Sometimes they’re not the easiest, but you have to have those relationships in order to accomplish what’s best for our students and our families.”

School Board Members viewed relationships with the superintendent as critical to their success as a school board and as a district. This relationship not only defined the structure of board meetings but also the type of work that board members conducted.

Relatedly, members also highlighted the importance of having a superintendent who aligns with board-established goals and visions. As Riley explained:

[W]e didn't, at the time, have a superintendent that was implementing [the board's vision] in an effective way ... At every layer of the system, you need people that are doing this work. Like at the policy level, you need it, and then you need a superintendent that can operate in that way as well. That brings in a whole team behind them that's able to kind of implement effectively.

Taylor described the importance of the board-superintendent relationship succinctly, sharing, “People vote for us. We make a hire. We’re watching that person, and that person is working. They’re the maestro. They’re the conductor. We expect performance out of them.” Reiterating the board’s oversight responsibility, he went on to explain:

If the district doesn't perform or performs badly, board members are not going to fall on the sword. They're going to change the superintendent, and then the next superintendent is going to blow up the cabinet. And then if that doesn't work, then people start voting out school board members [and] start paying attention.

Board members saw relationships with other school board members as complex and consequential for their ability to achieve board goals. The need to act as a collective body can be challenging at times, as Jordan indicated, especially when board members “come in with lived experience with certain values, certain assumptions, certain goals, maybe objectives that [they] ran for office on.” Similarly, Miguel described a necessary shift in how he thought about board service as a candidate and then as a member:

I readily admit that in order to run for an elected position to become a council member, trustee, what have you, there has to be a certain amount of ego to put yourself out there. But the understanding is once you're elected, you have to transition from thinking about the position as if it's all about yourself. It's all about me trying to win, to now you're on a governing board that acts as a collective body.

Yet through dialogue and understanding, these differences do not have to be impossible barriers to overcome. As Dana, primarily a Rule Follower, shared:

We have a really great board. The board members with me right now, they understand me. They may not agree with me, but I don't feel like it's adversarial. [They say] "We hear you, but because of these factors..." and they all have good rationale about their factors. I don't agree with them, and sometimes I think they're blurring the legal lines, in my opinion. But my board is just awesome.



STRATEGY:

Pre-Board Meeting Community Building

Board members regularly acknowledged the importance of building relationships and working together to accomplish shared goals. While many school boards scheduled yearly retreats to establish board goals, Charlie described the importance of having more frequent opportunities to get to know each other as people, not just as fellow board members:

We all come [to the board meetings] a little bit early so that we can talk. We don't talk about board items, but that's more of our time as friends and neighbors, where we talk about what's going on in our community. So, no board topics, but we all do show up a little bit early to have those moments together.

Relationships between board members were also viewed as a significant influence on how policies are developed. Miguel described a shift in his board where a member who had previously been in the minority for most board decisions ultimately came into the majority after an election and used relationships with other board members to enact a personal/political agenda:

Suddenly, the decisions that we made were not driven by staff recommendations or information given to us by staff. Agenda items were not based on the needs of our programs or our operations, or our facilities. Agenda items and discussion, if there was any at all, and ultimately, any votes, was based on that individual's cajoling of the ... other individuals that are in the majority that they effectively control ... Where the individual felt that they had been disrespected in the past by an individual, whether it be a subordinate staff member, whomever, suddenly those individuals were now facing this colleague's retribution. And that's someone who doesn't have so much a political agenda, but a personal agenda.

Yet Taylor, characterized as a Champion, explained that political differences do not have to be an impossible barrier to overcome when board members share a set of common goals and a belief in public education. He explained that when he and other more politically progressive board members were facing a recall attempt, the conservative members of [the] board “didn’t take that opportunity to grandstand or score cheap political points.” He described how:

They stood with us. I mean, very literally and figuratively, shoulder to shoulder from the dais, attacking those efforts. They could have just stood by and said nothing, or they could have paid lip service to it, and they would have scored a lot of easy points on the right. But they understood what their job was.

The job, in this case, of a school board was to insulate the district from external influences while staying focused on conducting district business, despite political pressures. This proved difficult at times as some board members view themselves “as a vehicle to process parent concerns and complaints.” Similarly, when describing such board members, Jordan shared:

Clearly, board members feel pressure from the community and sometimes even from friends and neighbors. But in the end, I don't agree with placing our district in legal jeopardy or financial jeopardy to please the whims of the parent community.

Navigating relationships with community members was challenging for some board members due to differing understandings of what the school board *should* be doing. As Alex explained:

People think we have much more power than we do, so we get blamed for a lot of things ... Our oversight is over one person. I think they may think that we direct anyone other than one person, but we direct and evaluate one person. And that is our job as five people to hire and evaluate. And they deal with everything else...

Similarly, several board members commented on strained relationships with constituents who wanted to engage directly with them at meetings, but did not fully understand the limits facing school board members in public meetings. Miguel described the process of community engagement at board meetings as “mostly a one-way street,” meaning:

We won't respond to you. At the very most, what we may do is direct staff to follow up with you and get your contact information in that moment. Unless it is an emergent situation right there at that moment, we can't take action. And so if you come to me and say, "This is happening to my students and I want you to do XYZ," the board president who's chairing the meeting will basically say, "Thank you for your comments."

Board members often expressed a willingness to engage more with community members, but acknowledged that these public meeting laws and policies governing public comment at board meetings constrained these efforts. As Alex explained, "It's hard. And then you know, a lot of community members don't know, but meetings are held in public for us to do business in front of the public, not like, with the public."

Though this challenge centers on public (mis)understanding and beliefs, it also relates to the nature of state policies, which we examine further below.



STRATEGY:

Board-Community Outreach Workshops

Board members often shared how complex policies and guidelines (e.g., the Brown Act) can create distance between the board and members of the community. Recognizing the limitations of community engagement during regular board meetings, Riley described a promising practice of board-community workshops, in which two board members visit a school site, which opened lines of communication about emerging issues within the community:

We have our board meetings, but we also have themes of the month. So we have the study sessions and regular board meetings, but then our superintendent also does a podcast that month around that topic, and then he's implemented a board and community workshop. In California, we have the Brown Act, so people can't just talk about whatever topic they want. Sometimes people are like, "I'm gonna show up at the board meeting. I'm gonna talk to them about school lunches," and we're like, "We can't talk to you about school lunches because it's not on the agenda." So, two board members go to a school site around whatever the topic is. There'd be two trustees that would go, and it's just like a conversation. We sit in a circle and say, "This is the focus. We'll talk to you a little bit about math, but whatever topic that's coming up for you, we'll talk about that too." So it just opens up those lines of communication.

CHALLENGE #2

The Burden of Time



SUMMARY: Participants often detailed the extensive time burdens that they faced in accomplishing their duties as board members, specifically noting the considerable time spent on community engagement, preparing for board meetings, and the political duties associated with being a public figure. These challenges led some board members to feel less effective and influenced their motivations to continue serving on the board.

Fulfilling the key roles and responsibilities of a school board member — setting direction, creating policies and supportive structures, ensuring accountability to the public, and serving as community advocates — requires investments of time. CSBA and others make clear that to be “effective,” a board member “participates in professional development and commits the time and energy necessary to be an informed and effective leader” (CSBA, 2018, p.3). As we describe next, participants expressed concerns about the burdens these expectations placed on them.

SBMs reported spending significant amounts of time on board-related activities, with some particularly noting increases in recent years. When asked about the time that they spent on board-related work in two weeks in early March (See Table 3), responses ranged from just a few hours to approximately 45 hours. As some noted, the time spent was highly dependent on the time of year or season. For example, Charlie shared:

Now, reach me again next month. I think we’re quite busy, because we’ll have our superintendent evaluation. We will have some other things coming up within the district that we need to address. But right now it’s kind of a lull because, I think, of the holiday. ... [A]nd then as we start to close out the year, there will obviously be more things coming up.

Several board members explained that they spent a significant amount of time preparing for the board meeting by reading agendas, minutes, policy documents, etc. Miguel explained:

In early March, we had a special meeting two weeks prior. And then we had a regular meeting on March 6. So just meetings alone, I mean, we’re talking about 14 hours right there, because our meetings do tend to run long. However, I do spend a considerable amount of time preparing for our meetings, reading through the material for each meeting, asking staff questions.

TABLE 3: Time Spent on Board-Related Tasks

School Board Member	Hours Spent on Board-Related Tasks in the Past 2 Weeks	For today's entry, please reflect upon the time you've spent on board-related tasks in the past 2 weeks (including today). This can include formal meetings, school visits, informal communication, reading, etc.
Morgan	15 hours	Over the past two weeks, I've spent approximately 15 hours on board-related activities. This includes two board meetings, closed and open sessions. I also joined a WASC [Western Association of Schools and Colleges] visit to one of our high schools. I had a meeting with student board members to debrief their visits to elementary and middle schools, and also spoke with the superintendent on different topics about questions I had about the agenda for the board meetings ... I also spent a lot of time reading emails also regarding this issue, and lots of interest from the public or different stakeholders and so going through their emails.
Taylor	8 hours	Our most recent meeting lasted about two hours. I spent a similar amount of time reviewing the agenda and attachments before the meeting. I was at two school sites for about an hour each, a lengthy exchange with a constituent regarding their child's experience, and another hour-long conversation with the teachers' union lead.
Jordan	12 hours	As I sort of looked back at my logs ... it's been a few hours on calls related to board matters, just talking with local constituents about concerns they had or issues that had come up and just kind of hearing their perspective and voice ... then a few hours every month, we hold a meeting between ourselves and five other school districts ... to talk about ... shared issues that relate to our districts ... I usually schedule a call with my superintendent right before, so that's our monthly call. And then a few hours, just keeping updated on emails ... keeping up to what's happening within the district.
Alex	45 hours	Let's see my calendar. Two hours today. On Sunday, I had speaking engagements from 10 am to 4 pm, six hours. And then I saw a play for two hours ... So it's eight hours, ten, and fourteen and a half. God, I mean, I would say, like 45 hours in two weeks. And that one's interesting. That's an interesting question because like, what's considered board-related activity and what's not?
Mia	20 hours	In the last two weeks, I would say I've spent about 20 hours. We did have a board meeting this past Tuesday, so the time was spent on attending the board meeting. The board meeting itself was about four and a half hours. Preparing for the board meeting was another probably two and a half hours. I attended a retirement recognition for our staff that was probably an hour and a half of time. I also attended the recognition for students. That was about two hours, and then I went to a high school site visit.

School Board Member	Hours Spent on Board-Related Tasks in the Past 2 Weeks	For today's entry, please reflect upon the time you've spent on board-related tasks in the past 2 weeks (including today). This can include formal meetings, school visits, informal communication, reading, etc.
Miguel	18–20 hours	Aside from 14 hours on a given week, I probably spend anywhere between four to six hours on board-related items, and that's just on either prepping for meetings or meeting with staff ... having discussions, getting updates on different things. Sometimes it's a lot more, sometimes it could be right around the same amount of time. Types of activities or tasks that I engage in ... conversations via either phone or email or in person with our superintendent and other staff [about] construction projects that we have going on right now, [about] instruction-related items we have right now. We have an initiative that is ongoing in order to improve our math scores ... site visits to visit our campuses.
Riley	40 hours	I mean, it's like 20 hours a week all in with board things ... Where I'm meeting with our unions and hosting coffee chats for the community, and going to community events, and visiting schools, and doing all the things that make you a good board member, because your ear's to the ground, and you're engaging.
Parker	4 hours	Over the past couple of weeks, we did not have a school board meeting. But we did have a parent education night, so our superintendent requested that we attend in support. So that was about two hours total, and we discussed a curriculum edition. She presented a curriculum edition to parents, and they had the opportunity to discuss it. So, a couple of hours there, then about a half an hour call with the superintendent principal about an enrollment issue. And then I'd say about another half an hour total face-to-face with parents throughout the last couple of weeks.
Dana	20–40 hours	The timing is just tremendous ... On a short week [it] could be five to eight hours of phone calls, email responses, going to events ... I mean, the number of events you have to go to is astronomical ... You're probably spending 20 to 40 hours, you know ... you go to an event five hours a night, you go to a show for the kids, you get invited to the choir performance, and the problem is everybody expects you to go.
Charlie	~ 1 hour	Honestly, I don't even know if I've spent an hour other than reading our Friday updates. We had spring break for a week so everyone was away from the school, so there wasn't really anything to do.

Note: The information in this table comes from the fourth audio diary prompt, with the exception of Riley, whose information comes from the first interview. Participants received this diary prompt in the first week of March, and most responded within three weeks.

Beyond attending regularly scheduled school board meetings, SBMs described a complex array of events and responsibilities that required significant amounts of their time. Reports of these extensive time commitments are not surprising given the widespread understanding that being a Representative for various constituents was an essential role of a board member. Attending events was seen as a good way to both learn about community needs and be visible, which clearly assisted with electoral pressures. Alex described some of these events as primarily political, explaining:

It's now an election year, so now added [to the typical board member responsibilities], there's a lot of political stuff. All the political clubs have their annual fundraisers. They have their mixers. They have their leadership summits. There's panels, etc. There's fundraisers. Your colleagues need to fundraise. Your partners in City Hall need to fundraise ... That takes up a lot of time as well.

Yet other events largely depended on the individual board members' conception of their role and responsibilities. For example, Mia, who was most strongly identified as a Champion and a Rule Follower, spent a significant amount of time attending community events, noting:

I've spent most of my time doing stuff that I should be doing. Because I view [the board's role] to be public-facing and front-facing. I think that that's our role. We're supposed to be the face of the district. And so, how can you do that when you're not present in the district?

Other board members reported attending similar events that were held at school sites. While these events were not mandatory, Jordan explained that they offered an opportunity to learn firsthand about what was happening on their campuses:

I was fortunate enough in these past few weeks to volunteer in a couple of Read Across America events, which was nice to get on campus ... Doing this ties me into the school community. I get to see the benefits of the work I do and that we do as a board, and get a better sense of the culture and climate on these campuses. I get to be present around teachers. They know I am invested within these schools, not just the schools that maybe I attended in the past or that my kids attend.

A few SBMs also explained that the minimal compensation³ for being a board member can make serving difficult for people who do not have flexible jobs and/or have significant personal responsibilities, and that these burdens affect one's ability to serve. Miguel reflected on the tension between a school board benefiting from having members with diverse experiences and perspectives, and how the amount of time required to be a member limits who is able to serve on a board:

I'm not sure how someone can take on this role if they're not retired, or financially self-sufficient in some other way ... I think that's something we have to think about. Who is able to serve on boards?

³ State policy allows SBMs to be compensated for their service, but there are "thresholds" based on school district size/average daily attendance with specific caps (currently \$1,500 per month) and allowable annual increases above the cap. Some districts also offer health and welfare benefits. There is legislation pending to increase these thresholds.

And how does that narrow the lens or viewpoints of and perspective of who is on those boards when it comes to smaller school boards that don't have that compensation that is needed?

Similarly, Charlie noted that the lack of adequate compensation contributed to the difficulties she faced recruiting community members to serve in their rural community:

Most of those families are two-parent workers, and they work all day long ... And I just think the last thing that they think of is now "You want me to come at night ... and I get no financial compensation? I get no benefits? There's no perks to me doing this. But yet you want more of me?"

Some board members explicitly named time constraints as a reason for not running again or not being as present as they believed a board member should be. For example, Riley felt successful in engaging the community as a school board member while working full-time, but expressed not being able to dedicate the same amount of time to the role after having children:

When I first joined the board, I felt like I was doing a really good job with [community engagement], before having kids and all that jazz. I mean, that was like 20 hours a week all in with board things ... But I don't have that kind of time now. And most board members don't.

Similarly, Dana explained:

Time? Well, that's why I'm not running again. I'm a teacher. I'm a coach. I'm a father. I'm a husband. First of all, my family is very important. And with our notices in our weekly summaries, we get about 20 pages a week. That's pretty heavy reading, because you're asking yourself questions or getting the material.



STRATEGY:
Knowing the Role of the School Board

While many board members readily acknowledged the time-related challenges of serving in this role, Mia also offered an insight into one way to manage the ever-growing list of board-related events and tasks. By prioritizing her role as a district Representative, she did not take on duties better suited for district staff:

I don't spend my time doing things I don't think is necessarily [the role of the school board]. We get a lot of people asking to meet with us on really specific policies, or specific curriculum issues, or concerns. Some of my colleagues will take those meetings. I don't because I always defer to staff. I'm not an expert, and I don't want to sit in a meeting and tell someone they're right and they may be wrong ... or make a promise that I can't keep.

CHALLENGE #3

Training and Capacity-Building



SUMMARY: Study participants generally expressed appreciation for the training that they received from various sources (i.e., CSBA, county offices of education, and district superintendents). Some board members also acknowledged the changing nature of board service and wanted additional training and support to meet their current needs.

Previous research on school board training explains that state-level professional development requirements are often varied and training sessions are largely aimed at promoting better relationships with superintendents, along with learning how to navigate legal and fiscal issues that the board will have to address (Anderson & Snyder, 1980; Eadens et al., 2020; Petronis et al., 1996; Plough, 2014). As we describe next, study participants expressed both appreciation for existing professional development opportunities as well as several unmet needs.

Several SBMs explained that much of the training opportunities that board members receive are largely focused on the legal, ethical, and fiduciary aspects of board service. Participants reported receiving some training through a variety of resources, including professional associations, county and state education offices, and/or professional development through their or superintendent's office. When describing the onboarding experience that she received at a state-level professional development conference, Charlie shared:

... a lot of things that were covered are more legalities like, "Two or more is a meeting" and those kinds of things, and social media, "Watch what you say on social media and what you're liking," and just those kinds of things. So it was more just the legality of it, not exactly the day-to-day of it, and how meetings run and things like that.

Board members often found this kind of training useful, as not all members had prior experience serving on boards or in similar positions, with Mia explaining:

Even though I felt pretty good about my abilities and my understanding of what it meant to be a trustee and what it meant to be board president, having gone through [state-level board training], it made it clear that there was a lot more to it than what I had thought or even anticipated.



STRATEGY: Establishing a Shared Foundation

Board members reported receiving various forms of training from county offices of education, district-level staff, and the California School Boards Association. Morgan specifically noted that the California School Boards Association’s Masters in Governance Program was an important opportunity to build a shared understanding of school board governance:

I participated in the CSBA Masters in Governance. It was pretty extensive, and we went through that together as a board, so we knew what everyone else knew. It was nice as a baseline because if you’re coming in with someone who has decades of experience, it’s hard to know what did they know? And then what am I missing? So that was helpful.

Some school board members also raised questions about the lack of required training for board service. Miguel noted that “there’s no training requirements to become a school board member, a trustee, at least not here in California.” Similarly, Alex explained that training was critical as “... we were literally sworn in, brought to the dais, and then we had to figure it out very fast.” Much of the on-the-ground learning that some board members eventually received was largely dependent on the district superintendent or county-level staff. For example, Charlie, a strong Champion and moderate Rule Follower, shared:

We rely heavily on our superintendent. The county is really good. We can always reach out to the county. I think we have a good system at our county offices. When we go to the [CSBA] conference once a year ... there’s sometimes new information there for us or contacts for us, but I feel like we rely heavily on our superintendent.

Absent these training opportunities, Dana explained, board members are often drawing on their individual backgrounds and lived experiences to make decisions as a board. He described a diverse array of expertise on their board, highlighting the fact that “You have a retired teacher on our board. You have an architect who’s been involved in the education foundation. You have a financial person. Everybody brings their experience.” While this expertise can be seen as valuable, Miguel underscored the importance of robust training opportunities, particularly because “These positions are supposed to be held by community members.” As he continued, Miguel emphasized the importance of the school board as a “community institution” but shared his belief:

It would be ... incredibly beneficial to have that requirement that [if] you want to serve in leadership, then you have to take [CSBA’s] Masters in Governance. Because you really need a good handle on what it means to be a trustee and what it means to be in those leadership positions.

While many SBMs appreciated any sort of training to help navigate the bureaucracy of public schooling, such as assisting in understanding acronyms or working with the Brown Act, others sought opportunities that more clearly spoke to the present-day realities of school board governance.

For example, Alex, a Changemaker, shared:

I've been to so many school board trainings, and I just think that the people creating them are of a past generation that aren't understanding how school boards are evolving ... I think that we're actually seeing a generational shift in information [between what] we're being given and what's actually happening.

Similarly, Riley, another Changemaker, advocated for more training opportunities that focused on how to meaningfully transform education systems:

I think one of the challenges in being a board member is ... a lot of people enter into school board members or other policy positions with all of the best intentions, but very little understanding about how to change a system. Like, what are the things that you need to do? Because we can sit around all day and talk about how we want it to be different but if we don't then implement structures and systems to ensure that it's data informed or if you don't create policies [or] if we don't create a strategic plan that centers X, Y or Z, it doesn't matter.

Taylor described the importance of training that emphasized how change actually occurs on a school board and the power that board members have:

There's probably a book to be written that outlines the actual power that you have on a board ... like, here's the real authority that you have. Here's what you can do as a board member ... You can insist on this, you can go and get this, you have access to this ... That would be hugely useful.

In raising this point, he also explained that this could be a particularly useful tool for board members “in districts where maybe the board doesn't feel like they're getting all the information or that they are being stonewalled [by the district administration].” By learning the tools and resources that are available to them, board members might be better equipped to perform their oversight duties as district stewards.



STRATEGY:
Peer-Learning Communities

Communities of practice or peer-learning communities can offer important opportunities for people serving in similar roles to learn from each other about key challenges and promising practices. Jordan described one such opportunity that provided an informal space to learn from and with other board members and superintendents in surrounding districts:

It’s really informal. We used to meet pre-COVID in a rotating set of offices. Now it is Zoom, so it’s a lot easier to orchestrate. Every month we meet, we’ll do district reports. So the superintendent and the board members will report out, there’ll be approval of minutes, recognition, all that stuff. And then there will be a presentation every meeting ... It’s part PD [and] part just “Hey, it’s nice to see you all. How are things going?” You know, I think it’s restorative in many ways to just check in and [know] we’re not the only school [district] that’s dealing with this stuff.

CHALLENGE #4

Using and Interpreting Data



SUMMARY: All school board members reported using data to inform decisions, generally relying heavily on quantitative data to ensure accountability for student outcomes. Yet many faced challenges such as wanting different types of data or worrying about a lack of capacity to properly interpret data.

There is a well-communicated consensus that data use represents a “best practice” of board service (Dervarics & O’ Brian, 2019). In fact, the California School Boards Association regularly includes data use as a practice expected of board members, notably, to ensure accountability to the public. It further notes that boards “establish systems and processes to monitor results, evaluate the school system’s progress toward accomplishing the district’s vision and communicate that progress to the local community”(CSBA, 2013, p. 2). Consistent with this expectation, without solicitation or explicit prompting, all SBMs raised the topic of data use in our early interviews. In fact, seven of them asserted that they individually and/or their board were “data-driven” and that examining data was an important part of their job. Though ubiquitous as a practice, we found considerable variation in how individuals conceptualized and used data, with some exhibiting more critical orientations and concerns about data literacy.

All SBMs generally privileged quantitative data, though some prioritized and wanted more qualitative data. All of the SBMs reported using quantitative data in some form — including data related to achievement, enrollment, attendance, discipline, and budget — but primarily focused on student outcome data. In fact, many equated data with quantitative forms. Miguel said, “Every decision that we make should be backed up by data ... We’re definitely a data-driven institution. I think most school districts are, and really should be. Because you have to rely on some quantitative information to understand what needs to be addressed.” Many SBMs asserted the value of quantitative data over other sources of information, noting they were more generalizable than anecdotes and provided crucial inputs for action.

Nevertheless, most of the SBMs at some point in our data collection reported using a form of data that we would categorize as qualitative, such as school/classroom observations and town hall listening sessions. Yet four clearly prioritized this form of data about experiences, processes, and affect in their decision-making, and some wanted more of this type of data. Morgan, the only Changemaker who was also identified as a Rule Follower, found it challenging that colleagues and district leaders tended to emphasize the value of quantitative over qualitative data, explaining:

Those priorities of academic achievement and equity come into conflict. I have found that it’s much easier for folks to prioritize academic achievement and the fixation around data and dashboards, and test scores. I feel like there’s a lot of focus on that rather than more of the experience, the student experience.

Finally, some SBMs noted the value of comparative data from other districts. Four board members reported gathering both quantitative data (e.g., salaries) and qualitative data (e.g., quality of policies, programs, and practices) about other nearby districts to inform decisions.

**STRATEGY:****Invest in Platforms that Incorporate Varying Types of Data**

While quantitative data (e.g., student test scores, enrollment numbers, chronic absenteeism percentages) were prevalent in the types of data that board members understood and used, Morgan raised the importance of also ensuring qualitative data helped to inform district decision-making. The board member described one investment into a platform that expanded their ability to have more robust data conversations:

The quantitative data is interesting and useful for a birds-eye perspective. But we've actually been asking for more qualitative data from the district. We want to know what the actual student and family or staff experience is, and so I know we've made an investment to get [a] platform where it's a little bit easier to administer surveys or get that qualitative data. ... [S]o hopefully, that's going to be a tool that is more widely utilized to get a more immediate touch point into different stakeholder sentiments for different programs. Where we need to be making changes or putting in more effort, or even, "Maybe this isn't something that we need to prioritize."

Most board members used data for accountability purposes, although some also saw the value of using data to learn more about constituent needs and to focus on and disrupt inequalities. Overall, SBMs typically reported using data for accountability, including to evaluate the superintendent; investigate the root cause of a problem (e.g., attendance, declining enrollment); prioritize solutions; assess progress of district programs; and make budget decisions. For example, Charlie believed their board was more effective in setting district priorities and evaluating the superintendent because of its recent decision to use data. Their new evaluation process was less subjective than the prior one because it now included analyzing data from the previous school year to guide the creation of goals, which would become the basis of the superintendent's subsequent evaluation. Before incorporating data as part of the evaluation process, board members offered conflicting feedback to the superintendent. Charlie believed the new process was "the right way to go" because "we were just all kind of winging it before. I do think it's helpful to have something that we can backup, have something substantial to base things on as opposed to just a bunch of feelings."

Several board members proactively requested or gathered data to better understand constituent needs and experiences — efforts that helped facilitate their "Representative" role. Instead of depending on board meetings with relatively low attendance, these SBMs pushed administrators to conduct surveys to "hear" from a greater proportion of affected individuals. Rather than relying only on staff reports of how students, families, and staff were experiencing district programs or where there was a need for improvement, they visited schools or conducted observations to see and speak more directly with these constituents. For example, Alex noted the value of organizing "listening sessions" at school sites with staff, community groups, elected officials, and parents prior to placing a bond on the

ballot. He believed these sessions allowed people “to be heard” and express their general concerns, ultimately informing the five-year plan, which schools and projects to prioritize, and the ultimate construction contract the board would approve.

About half of the board members — all characterized as Changemakers — used data to help them focus on and disrupt inequities. Some of them believed that data helped illuminate opportunity gaps and underachievement, allowing them to better support those in need. Data use focused on inequity typically presented itself as 1) disaggregated data, often with a focus on historically marginalized students, or 2) ensuring “fairness” of district decisions.

Those displaying a more critical orientation to data use went beyond considering what was fair or identifying “gaps.” Several pointed to the dangers of relying heavily on quantitative data and the potential for data-use practices (e.g., disaggregating data) to generate deficit-based data interpretations. For instance, Jordan noted “a lot of entrenched systemic influences beyond education alone, that influence what those metrics that we have to show,” and raised serious questions about the interpretation of academic data and false attributions to individuals students and in-school factors.

As a result, these board members tried to use data to consider the broader context and also take actions to correct for historical or systemic disadvantage. They all displayed a strong commitment to acting on new knowledge gained from the data to achieve more just outcomes. For example, Alex used data to both push for new programs and resources to support the low levels of reading proficiency among Black students in the district and to evaluate and scale up programs.

Alex and a few other SBMs using data in critically conscious ways were people of color who reported a strong motivation to act on data because of their self-described marginalized identities. In fact, Riley believed that board members with marginalized identities generally take on a greater role in using data to deliberate on inequities than other members because it is “personal”:

Who’s willing to really stick their neck out? Not that many people. ... Who’s the one that really is going to push on this [inequities revealed in data] because it’s ... personal. ... And then ... the pushback that you get as a result of that ... how it’s received and interpreted ... Every single Person of Color elected official that I’ve talked to, I mean, the number of times that people [ask] “Why am I doing this? ... I should just resign, right?” ... [I]t takes a huge toll on people.

Importantly, this board member also noted the psychological “toll” it has taken on her and others in elected office who push to address inequity but receive constant pushback and little support.

Board members appeared to vary in their level of data literacy, and multiple SBMs felt that data literacy was a challenge for their colleagues. Several of the SBMs who did not report a lot of data use appeared to be individuals lacking experience with or general skills around using data, and instead relied heavily on central office staff and the superintendent to provide not just the data but also the interpretations. One SBM admitted to feeling “completely overwhelmed” by long budget reports and relying heavily on the superintendent to translate (“she explains things really well”). Some feared that

by counting on administrators' reports, their colleagues were too trusting and less able to challenge district leaders. "They see the presentation. And it's like, 'Oh, great, everything looks good.'" explained one board member, "... and the top line numbers look phenomenal, because we are a high performing district ... But what can we do in these other bands to improve some of these other outcomes?"

Other board members, particularly those reporting data use for public accountability, often conveyed strong data literacy skills and knowledge — calling out the importance of understanding 1) the ways questions are asked when interpreting survey results (e.g., wording that is "leading"), 2) differences between causation and correlation, and progress versus status, and 3) the context for interpreting results. Most of the SBMs demonstrating strong data literacy had professional experience either looking at data in general (Taylor, Mia) or using educational data (Jordan, Alex, and Riley had experience in K12 schooling). One board member, (Mia) who shared multiple examples of "digging in" to interpret data, attributed these skills to her profession. Board members using data to address inequity also demonstrated signs of "critical data literacy" — a set of skills, knowledge, and dispositions helping data users confront biases, acknowledge power inequalities in society, challenge notions of data as neutral and objective, and act on new knowledge to disrupt inequity.⁴



STRATEGY: **Data-Dives during Board Study Sessions**

Recognizing that board members often have limited time outside of the board meetings to conduct district business, Riley explained that her board devotes protected time during board study sessions to engage in data analysis and meaning-making. This practice creates an opportunity for shared understanding of the data itself and allows for more time to ask questions of district staff.

We take time on it. Because we do it in the closed session. And [the superintendent] typically gives us like an hour and a half to two hours, even in those times. So we can spend time really like, can you click on a question, and then let's go through the answers.

⁴ We derive these ideas from the work of Louie (2022) on critical data literacy and related concepts of culturally relevant data literacy (Mandinach, 2024) and data use for equity (Dodman et al., 2023).

CHALLENGE #5

Shifts in Technology



SUMMARY: Though some participants appreciated the ways technological advancements (e.g., live-streaming board meetings, increased social media interactions) enhanced community participation, many found it challenging to navigate these shifts, noting capacity constraints in smaller districts and concerns that increased access did not necessarily result in more meaningful community engagement. Some noted that these new technologies lead to negative consequences, such as spreading misinformation, harassment, and feelings of isolation.

Advancements in technology are affecting all aspects of society, and democratic governance is no exception (Kahne et al., 2016; Nelson et al., 2017). All school board members that we spoke with detailed significant shifts in the ways that board meetings took place, particularly around the technological aspects of community engagement. Many of these shifts involved changes to the structure of board meetings to allow for fully virtual or hybrid meetings, virtual opportunities for public comment, and more accessible recorded board meetings posted on district websites. For some board members, this has also led to increased interaction with community members through social media platforms (e.g, Twitter/X, Facebook, TikTok). Although some of these changes were taking place over the past 20 years, board members noted a rapid acceleration during the COVID-19 pandemic. Perceptions of these recent changes in technology varied across study participants, with some seeing advantages and others noting challenges to their ability to govern.

Some viewed the technological shifts positively, as they allowed for a broader range of participation. Alex noted,

I think that what we saw after COVID, when we offer hybrid options, more people will tune in. I think what started as a thing because everyone was home and we actually couldn't meet in person, and everyone was just doing Zoom ... We saw that the attendance went from, like, 10 people to like 300 people overnight.

Similarly, Miguel explained that engagement often continued outside of the confines of the scheduled meeting times:

There's more engagement in the sense that although people aren't physically present, they are watching our meetings from home. I can see how many people are currently watching a live meeting, and then you can always go back and see how many views that particular stream has received ... And I think if we didn't stream, people would not be as engaged, and it gives them the opportunity to do it from the comfort of their home or wherever they might be, or at their own leisure.

Despite these views, several board members also highlighted the challenges associated with increased reliance on technology.

Increased use of technology presented a new set of capacity challenges for smaller and rural districts. Parker observed that due to their small district size, there were often few staff available to help implement new tools for engagement, such as virtual meetings, explaining, “It’s ... just a small team. [Our] TOSA [Teacher on Special Assignment], she is part-time ... we just have to sort out how that would work into her schedule.” Charlie also pointed to the challenges of navigating poor internet quality in rural contexts, noting:

Well, for me, I did not like the Zooms. I live in the country, so we don’t have very good Wi-Fi. So I always felt there was a delay in the meeting. So it was really hard to interact, because there would be a pause, and then when I started talking, I was talking over someone else. So I did not like them at all. So, getting back, we all like each other. So it was nice to be back and see each other.

Some board members observed that increased attendance and participation through technology had not always led to a corresponding increase in meaningful interactions. Morgan acknowledged the unfulfilled promise of technological advances, sharing:

I think that there’s a lot of potential that hasn’t been capitalized on yet. We still allow for people to join over Zoom for public comments. And there are some folks who do choose to do that. But it’s not like it has been transformative in the way that I thought it might be.

Alex explained that some of the apparent lack of participation could also be attributed to a general lack of understanding of how school boards work and the purpose of board meetings:

I remember when I was coming out to my first board meeting on Zoom [as a community member], being a [younger] person, and being like, “I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing. [I] couldn’t find the agenda. How do I find the agenda? And I’m supposed to know how to use technology. Like what’s going on? I mean, even how to read the agenda, “What does item 8.6 mean?” I [know] now, but at the time, I didn’t know what is the consent agenda? ... Why is that voted all at once? What’s an information item? What’s a public hearing? Like all these things...

Yet Morgan wondered aloud whether virtual meetings partially minimized certain power dynamics and hierarchies between the board and community members. She recalled how different in-person board meetings felt when compared to virtual meetings because, as a board member, “... you’re seated higher. You’re facing everyone else. You have a gavel and a mic and the cameras pointed at you.” However, she suggested that virtual meetings can feel “more democratic, because we’re all sort of sitting in front of a computer.”

While shifts to virtual meetings may not have always led to higher levels of engagement with community interest-holders, these shifts did cause board members to consider how hybrid or virtual environments may influence their behaviors and feelings about their role as board members. For example, when describing the experience of conducting meetings in person with a mostly virtual audience, Jordan expressed a sense of alienation and exhaustion, explaining:

You know, it's hard at times because you have these moments of like, "Oh, I'm caught up by this and I want to talk to people!" and there's no one there ... So that's the piece where it's just, it's just odd. It feels strange and alienating in that way ... There's no feedback ... There's no, you know, even the facial expressions, right? I'm like, "Oh, are they engaged? Are they curious? Are they bored to death?" I don't know. It's really exhausting in that way.

Although board members could not necessarily predict which meetings would have a higher turnout or more interest from community members, Miguel emphasized the benefit of being able to gauge community interest based on digital views, recalling:

When things were really contentious last year, I was in a meeting one day, and I could see that there were 200 active viewers during a meeting, which is not typical. And then the following day, on Thursday, and then into Friday, the view count on that meeting went from like 1,000 views to over 4,000. A lot of people were paying attention.

Knowing that many constituents may watch the meeting recording at a later date, Miguel also stressed the importance of choosing his words carefully. He acknowledged that live-streaming and recording board meetings have changed his behavior in some ways, sharing, "I try not to speak extemporaneously in the moment, especially in the heat of passion, because you don't want to say something that you're going to regret."

**STRATEGY:****Consider the Permanence of the Internet**

As school boards transitioned to offering virtual and hybrid opportunities to engage with board members, several board members noted the importance of speaking not only to the audience that was physically present in the room but also to the virtual audience, particularly those who might watch the recording at a later date. Miguel explained the importance of not censoring oneself, but being prepared when it's time to speak and being mindful of the permanence of the internet:

My words are going to live, you know, in the ether for the entirety of time, so I have to be very mindful of what I say. Now, that doesn't mean that I've ever, you know, censored myself or not said something because of that. I've always been very mindful of any messages that I put out, especially in an official capacity when I'm sitting on the dais. Most of the time, if I'm going to say something, I have notes that I've taken ahead of time. I may even have a written statement ready to go, depending on how the conversation is going. But I would have done the same had the meetings not been streamed. It's just that now I'm very cognizant that all of these activities live on forever. Nothing ceases to exist once it's on the internet, and so I'm very cognizant of that.

Several board members also described significant challenges in navigating social media use, which in some cases led to personal harassment and the spread of misinformation. Board members, particularly those who viewed themselves as Representatives and wanted to interact directly with community members, often had to keep track of complex rules about personal and professional social media interactions. For instance, Mia explained that even when using her personal social media accounts, “Once I post something involving the district, it’s open. I can’t just say ‘No, it’s closed.’ I don’t know that all of us as trustees follow that. But as a trustee, I am very careful what I post.”

For some board members who used social media regularly, the open, yet at times anonymous, nature of social media interactions led to personal attacks and harassment. Taylor explained:

Social media absolutely destroys nuance in any conversation and triggers people that are the most reactionary ... I mean, all of us on the board have received those comments, whether it's on NextDoor or on Facebook, or now, Instagram is the popular platform. It's a terrible platform for communication because it's very hard to have back and forth. It's all very imagery-driven.

These negative experiences were not solely reserved for board members but also impacted district staff who were tasked with managing online interactions. For example, Alex described the vitriolic nature of some of the online comments at board meetings, explaining:

What people are willing to say when they're at home, camera off, on Zoom, they wouldn't keep that energy in person ... There's some staff that have actually asked for us to consider only making public comments in person because the board can handle it. I think by nature, we're used to people yelling at us, but it really sucks for staff when they're on Zoom [and people are] being really, really, really nasty to staff ... accusing them of all types of things that they would never say in person.

Miguel explained that social media use, while beneficial at times, has led to instances of personal harassment:

I'm a huge proponent of social media ... It allows you to engage with people very quickly, and oftentimes in a very meaningful way. I'll share information about not only our upcoming events or any initiatives that we're taking, but I'll also hear from people on concerns that they may have. They may not be able to go to a board meeting. ... [However] you have people who decide that they want to come and troll you, you know, and say nasty things or, in some cases, even make threats.

As such, Miguel noted that advances in technology can be "... a double-edged sword, because then you have to deal with the negative side of things."



STRATEGY: **Effectively Use Social Media to Demonstrate Impact**

In a new age of technology where districts are regularly engaging with the public on social media, Alex explained that social media provided opportunities to connect with different audiences and demonstrate that the board is listening to and acting on community members' concerns:

Technology and social media have actually given us a platform to streamline the work that we're doing. Either through newsletters or Instagram reels, or TikToks, I think politicians now, especially as we continue to elect younger people, are figuring out creative ways to educate the public on how their government is working or not working.

CHALLENGE #6

“Big P” and “little p” Politics⁵



SUMMARY: The majority of board members felt the influence of the national turbulent political environment (“Big P Politics”) and/or local power struggles (“little p politics”). This political climate created many challenges for board members, including difficulty balancing competing constituent references and demands, unexpected confrontations via social media and recall campaigns, as well as stress and discomfort.

It is well documented that in recent years our country has become more divided. Issues that once attracted bipartisan support are scarcer (Daniller, 2024). Individuals from one political party are also far more likely to see those from the opposing party in a negative light (Drunkman et al., 2024; Levendusky & Stecula, 2021). This political fracturing — along with well-publicized “culture wars” around issues of identity politics regarding race, gender, and sexual orientation — has seeped into education (Houston, 2024) and the school board environment (Collins, 2023; Kogan, 2022; Pollock, 2021; Rogers, 2024; White et al., 2023). The school board members in our study were not immune to these conditions, often citing challenges navigating political forces that were both national and local in their origins.

Many SBMs felt the strains of increasing polarization and “Big P” Politics. Several board members acknowledged the broader trends of polarization and its influence on local behavior. As one Rule Follower, Dana concluded, it is not simply that partisan politics have become a staple of school board decision-making, but that partisanship drives people to become more adversarial and lose sight of the district’s core function:

It’s kind of driving me nuts a little bit, ... it’s unfortunate, because those bipartisan politics become partisan, and they become adversarial. And when we’re talking about students, I don’t think there is one that doesn’t matter. They all matter.

Similarly, another board member called out “politicization” as less about external influences and more about the ways in which community members come to meetings with “swinging an axe and an agenda”(Miguel). Yet another Champion SBM observed an increase in more polarized debates and “internalized extreme norms” advanced by certain board members and community members which “impedes good discussion and impedes alternate views from being expressed.”(Parker)

A few SBMs even noted how political partisanship started to dominate life outside of meetings, from the neighborhood to the classroom. “It’s very hard in a small community,” said Charlie, “Because you see these people at the grocery store, you see them at the school carnival, and some of them are not

⁵ This typology of politics came from a conversation with former school board member Valerie Cuevas. We are grateful for her insights.

quiet about their beliefs.” Dana reported political conflict seeping into classrooms: “A teacher who suddenly flew a political flag in his classroom, for several years before this DEI push, may now be questioned as to why that flag is in his classroom. A benign object now is a political object.”

SBMs reported multiple drivers of these political shifts. Interestingly, there were no consistent patterns in where they placed the origins of these changing political conditions. Several SBMs attributed these trends to national influences, particularly well-funded external political groups. As Miguel noted:

The forced outing policies for transgender or LGBTQ students ... Those are coming not from a grassroots effort. But it's very much a coordinated, well-funded effort by right-wing organizations that are pushing this agenda under the guise of parental rights. In reality, it's not about parental rights; it's about these organizations that do not support efforts to provide diversity.

Others similarly alluded to an increased presence of non-local groups taking up board meeting time. Parker noted, “it does seem like we have fringe groups that are just getting loud and extreme and may not be speaking for the public as a whole.”

Charlie connected increased tensions at board meetings with state-level politics and decisions that place board members in the uncomfortable position of implementing policies that may not align with community preferences (e.g., ethnic studies curriculum):

I will say only this wasn't a problem 10 years ago, I see more of a problem now ... politics have really started to play a role in board meetings, in the sense of policies that are passed, that we have to implement. And there's a lot of controversy on some of them. And that makes its way into our board meetings. I mean, you have to follow the law and implement things in that sense. But a lot of the community, if they're not for it ... it's a very touchy subject.

Many SBMs identified COVID as the origin of these political shifts. Several SBMs pointed out the ways in which board meetings had changed since the pandemic. “We lost control during COVID,” admitted Charlie. Alex explained:

[P]re COVID, the school board was just a rubber stamp ... Their meetings were like two hours. Ours are like 10. ... It's like night and day, I mean, the community participation was not a thing. ... But now, I think because of the political element, there's now been a higher concentration and focus of local government and stuff on school boards.

During the pandemic, Alex explained, parents realized the importance of schools and school boards: “when, you know, it was school boards who voted to close schools ... that was like the first wake-up for a wide range of people and to let what that job ... [and] how powerful it is. And then with this, like insurgence, of banning books, etc, etc, like, we are seeing very politicized school boards.”

These “Big P” political dynamics created dilemmas for SBMs. SBMs faced several challenges navigating this contentious political environment. As referred to above, Charlie expressed dilemmas making decisions they believed were educationally and morally right, but conflicted with the viewpoints of vocal conservative constituents with the power to re-elect her. Charlie felt caught in the middle of being required to implement putatively liberal state policies that conflicted with the preferences of her conservative community:

[O]ur conservative community does not always agree with what’s happening in our state. And especially if our state is doing something that is very different from another state, then we get a lot of people upset and saying, “Well, if another state’s doing it, why can’t we?” People have a harder time believing that we have to follow local laws or state laws. And that we can’t just make our own decisions in that realm.

As noted earlier in the report (navigating relationships), board members found it challenging to educate the public on what was and was not in their control. Several board members also found it difficult to balance increasing community expectations to “take a stand” on national political issues with their beliefs about the proper role of a board. These SBMs felt pressured to act in ways that did not fit their view of the job. Dana explained that national politics is affecting people, bringing in “geopolitical issues that don’t have any relevance on our dais”:

Do we need as a board to condemn Hamas for what they did to Israel? ... Does our board need to make a political statement about that? It’s not our place. We’re there to conduct business about the school district and the mission and philosophy, and policies of the school district. We don’t need to make a political statement.

Similarly, Alex, who holds very different self-described political viewpoints, also expressed some discomfort responding to constituent demands for such statements:

National conversations are what voters, especially in presidentials [election seasons], have in mind when voting on their local offices ... people want to know what we’re doing about critical race theory and what we’re doing about book bans and what we’re doing about abortion rights, which are all very important issues. Most of which I don’t think is the role of the school board.

Once in office, Alex described the challenges of “juggling” local policy issues with these broader “politically driven” demands:

[I’m] juggling things like the LCAP [Local Control and Accountability Plan], juggling ... [what] we need to do, bargaining and labor management partnerships, etc. But also, what are we doing about Roe v. Wade being overturned, and having a statement about that? [W]hat are we doing about our role in the climate crisis? Is our bus fleet electric? ... are we running on solar panels? ... are we encouraging alternate modes of transit use for kids to get to school? And so we’re juggling all these different priorities right now as a district. I mean, I don’t think it’s bad. I think it’s good that all legislative bodies are figuring out what role they have to play in

a larger movement. But ... it's really all we talk about, because it's what people expect us to talk about, or what people want us to talk about, it's the sexy thing to talk about. ... [I]t's not sexy to talk about the LCAP.



STRATEGY:

Proactive Outreach Prior to School Board Elections

A few board members noted that actions taken prior to being elected greatly assisted them in navigating local politics. They highly valued connections made and discussions during their campaign seasons with key civic leaders, including the superintendent, who often provided them with knowledge of political sensitivities and potential challenges they may face during the campaign and beyond. Miguel reported coordinating with the superintendent during the election process to get a better understanding of the system before he started making statements publicly about the district:

In my school district, my superintendent reaches out to candidates every election cycle [and] invites them to sit down ... to go over our budget, to look at our enrollment, to look at ... initiatives that we're working on, so that folks have a better understanding before they go in and say anything.

However, not all SBMs experienced Big P political tensions or saw these shifts as entirely negative.

Though they experienced challenges during the pandemic, Miguel felt that because of the homogeneity of their largely immigrant, low-income district, they were insulated from the more recent, broader social issues endemic to a diverse, pluralistic district:

During the height of the COVID pandemic, when we were discussing vaccine mandates for certain student populations, obviously, national politics did play into that. We had a very small group, a very small minority, mostly led by outside, for lack of a better term, agitators who did come in and complain or protest our mandates and any discussion that we had around that. Aside from that, though, we've been fairly insulated about the broader, quote unquote, culture wars that have been going on, as it relates to LGBTQ matters, DEI initiatives, to a lesser extent, CRT.

Another board member, Alex, who also observed the downside of the growing polarization, noted that this new political climate created positive opportunities for non-traditional individuals, particularly from marginalized backgrounds, to serve on boards. Prior to COVID, he observed, “school boards were made of ... usually educators, usually parents, usually advanced degrees.” Post-COVID, Alex argued, people saw how powerful school boards could be, and more non-traditional candidates started running:

Now that we're in this highly politicized role, we are now electing new voices, myself included. ... I think we're saying, "Well, why shouldn't organizers be on the school board? Why shouldn't former students be on the school board? Why shouldn't people with different lived experience? Why shouldn't current students be on the school board?"

Many SBMs reported challenges navigating “small p” politics. Often unrelated to national ideological battles or external organizations pushing on culture war issues, these members experienced local and often interpersonal local power grabs and conflicts. A few SBMs mentioned the specter of labor disputes — an age-old source of political conflict at the local level. Other members spoke about conflicts with fellow board members perceived to be seeking power. Miguel described the effects of a recent election, in which one member gained a majority and pursued a “personal agenda” driven by “retribution” to punish individuals who had “disrespected” the member.

Similarly, Mia described a divide on the board that was “not policy driven” and instigated by the board president, who “likes to stir the pot” and create “divisiveness” for political gain. In one example, the board president chose to bring up a topic meant for closed session in the open meeting to signal to the teachers’ union which board members were “pro labor or anti labor.” When asked to explain the motivation for these actions, she explained:

He likes to create division, ... And I think he wants to have this other person who's up for reelection feel that she has to curry favor with him. And he could make life easier for her if she went along with what his agenda is. ... What the hidden agenda is, I wish I could tell you, except that it is just to sow division, and maybe make himself feel more important.

Alex attributed similar, local political dynamics to living in a small town where board members often want to hire friends who, once hired, become “untouchable.”

Other SBMs reported election-related politics. A self-described “progressive” SBM recalled entering the race and various individuals reaching out, “trying to understand my political leanings and whether I was coming in with a particular agenda.” Though “some folks who maybe wanted another candidate to have more of an advantage dissuaded me from running,” she explained, others were very supportive, particularly several outgoing SBMs who “provided a lot of guidance.”

Though these local power dynamics are not new to school boards, it is, of course, hard to disentangle them from the broader national political climate. For example, the increased use of social media spreading misinformation — a national trend — may have influenced the recall campaigns described by two board members (Rogers, 2023). Similarly, the heightened adversarial dynamics observed at higher levels may have trickled down to the local level.

Taylor described being “unjustly targeted by our recall as a way to humiliate or embarrass.” Though the public rationale was that the recall pertained to a vote on a controversial issue, multiple other board members who voted the same way were not targeted: “So we [there were several SBMs targeted] understood it to be political in nature. It was more and more to do with ... our public politics.”

The recall sponsors spread misinformation via social media and flyers, “saying terrible things about me and the others.”

SBMs attested to the psychological and emotional impact of these political dynamics. Several SBMs noted the discomfort and stress caused by school board meetings and political conflict. “We had the full, packed room,” Morgan explained when recounting one particular meeting during COVID. “Screaming parents not following any way shape, or form ... how a board meeting should go. Very, very emotional ... It was so rough ... and it was so political. It was insane. It was so stressful to go to meetings.

As noted above, SBMs targeted by politically motivated (failed) recalls expressed feelings of embarrassment and stress. One of these members explained:

That was embarrassing to wander around town. The church I grew up in ... someone had papered all the cars there with recall notifications ... And I know a lot of people there, I grew up with people there. ... If the effort was to humiliate, that to some degree is pretty successful because I did not feel great walking around in public for a few months until they couldn’t collect the signatures, and it never got to the ballot.

Others speculated that the more contentious political environment may be dampening motivation to serve in this elected position. Some, such as Jordan, felt the climate made it even less desirable to run, especially in smaller communities where things can get personal:

When we talk about things like the political tensions these days, how do you run in a small city — and a lot of our cities have gone to by-district [elections, as opposed to at-large] — when you’re intentionally running against someone now? And these are the same kids that have gone to school with you. ... And in this sort of environment we’re in, where it’s more charged than it ever has been, I wonder what that will do to small town elections, where it is going to be a very heated and interesting dialogue that may migrate away from what’s most valuable.

Dana expressed feeling ostracized for holding different political viewpoints from the majority of the board, which contributed to his decision not to run for re-election.

Finally, several SBMs reflected a sense that while the divisive politics portrayed in the media may not reflect the current state of their boards, it could be coming soon. This sense of anxiety is reflected in this statement from Miguel:

I’ve been very fortunate compared to some colleagues throughout the state, where they’re dealing with some really nasty politics that came up during the pandemic. They were driven by very well-funded and organized right-wing outlets. And oftentimes I kind of wonder if that’s going to come home here. If somebody’s going to show up and start making a fuss about something not too far from me. ... I often think about the difficulties that other trustees go through. ... I hope that it never happens here, but you never know. You have to be prepared for it.

Thus, even the specter of political conflict may be taking a toll on SBMs.

CHALLENGE #7

Structural and Policy Constraints



SUMMARY: Multiple board members raised concerns about structural constraints on their ability to govern — including state-level policies (e.g., public meeting laws and guidelines, state mandates) — and challenges resulting from electoral structures (e.g., at-large vs. wards) that shaped their work as a board member.

Like all public officials, school board members operate within the confines of state policies and structures intended to maintain public trust in and the integrity of government. As elected nonpartisan officials, they also serve in varying local systems, as state law allows for elections that are “at-large” (all voters vote for every seat on the board) and/or by “trustee-area” (voters in sub-geographic areas vote only for a candidate representing their area)⁶.

Some board members described having to navigate difficult political challenges regarding the electoral structures within their districts (i.e., at-large vs. by trustee-area). For example, Taylor described some hesitancy in running for a seat that was originally designed to provide greater access to representation for marginalized groups in his community. He recalled:

I live in a largely Hispanic, largely Democratic part of our school district. I think the expectation is that they would find a Hispanic candidate, but they had a hard time finding someone who spoke Spanish or represented that community, even though I think that was the intention of the law or the settlement.

Having previously run for election as an at-large candidate, Jordan described the experience of running in a pool of other candidates for multiple open seats with the belief that “We’re all running in this together, and you know, may the best people win.” However, as the district transitioned to trustee-area elections, he worried about the potential for political extremism due to smaller voting pools:

Is there going to be a dearth of candidates in a town that maybe you can win an election with only 200 votes? Could you get more extreme candidates to win because it’s only a handful of people that show up in each of these communities to vote now? And will people be willing to run against a neighbor, a friend, a colleague, a former coach? It’s going to be interesting to see what that does to different communities as, slowly but surely, we move into these smaller and smaller districts for school board roles.

Mia noted similar concerns, explaining, “I do think [the shift from at-large to trustee area districts] changes the dynamics.” She went on to consider broader ideas about the impact of these shifts on who she represented:

⁶ According to the California Voting Rights Act (2002), districts not using trustee elections can be sued and required to change the structure of elections if it is found to inhibit a protected class’s (e.g., a racial minority group) ability to elect or influence the outcome of an election.

So who do I represent? Or who do I serve? I'm going to say first, who do I serve? I serve all students, all families in the district. So as I come through policy thinking, it's really with all the students, the bigger picture. But who elects me? Well, there's a much smaller group of people who elect me ... There have been a couple of times, where as I make my comments ... as I explain a vote, I am very cognizant that there is a type of constituent who elects me.

Many board members viewed the requirements for public discourse under the Brown Act as a significant constraint on being able to have meaningful dialogue and deliberation. On one hand, Mia described these constraints as important protections, noting that “The Brown Act keeps us honest, right? So that we’re not all doing backroom deals.” Others explained that while the Brown Act was well-intentioned, it often placed significant barriers on their ability to facilitate authentic democratic engagement. For example, Alex explained:

I think that the Brown Act is one of the biggest barriers school boards are facing. It's my opinion that it is our job to engage conversationally with each other on the dais, but because of the Brown Act, we're unable to as a majority of the board, so for us we're actually unable to talk to anyone other than one other member on any certain issue.

He later acknowledged the intended outcomes of the law but described a disconnect between how such laws are interpreted at the state and local levels. From his perspective:

The legislature runs very “do as I say, not as I do,” because they have closed-door meetings as caucuses all the time, and we are unable to do that. Conversations in Sacramento, they're having in their caucuses, behind closed doors, without reporters, without the public, off the record, [and] they are telling us we need to have [ours] in public. It's a big ask to ask people to engage in necessary and frank conversations when they're constantly being watched, filmed, listened to. Their minutes are in the record for eternity. What we say is written and transcribed. And you can pull minutes from, for like, forever, they will always be there. And so I think that's a huge issue.

Other board members noted that these guidelines not only limited dialogue between board members, but also direct dialogue between the board and community members. As Taylor shared, “My understanding is by statute, we’re prevented from responding in real time. There’s no dialogue in the public comment. People have their piece. We are not to comment on anything that is not on the agenda.”

These guidelines, limiting what board members can address from the dais, continued to emerge as board members described their interactions with community interest-holders. Some board members noted a clear disconnect between what the public often believed board members could do and the realities of these constraints that school boards operated under. Alex noted:

The rules are so confined with what elected officials are allowed to talk about. We aren't allowed to talk about any issue that's not on the agenda because it needs to be properly noticed. And it's interesting, because a lot of community members, either forget that or choose to not respect that ... There's a lot of people who come and yell at us and demand responses or answers immediately. It's like, “Well, we can't do that.”

Taylor similarly likened board meetings to a classical Japanese theatre performance:

Our system has been so calibrated for fear of people abusing the system that it somehow is throttled from living up to its actual intent ... School board meetings are not places for people's ideas to be debated on the merit ... It is very Kabuki ... We already know what it is ... We've already been read in on it and we've already agreed to it.



STRATEGY: Board Member Comments to Address Community Concerns

Board members understood how legal constraints often limited their ability to quickly respond to community members seeking action on suddenly emerging issues. Recognizing the limits of being able to discuss items that were not previously agendized, Mia described how she used board member comment opportunities at the end of board meetings to facilitate responses to community members:

I have a notebook and I write down people's names and then I will follow up with the families myself when I have one that's come up a few times ... Many times [the family has] left by the time our board comments come around, where we can respond and say to the superintendent, "This family raised this issue. Can you please report back to us? We're very concerned." ... We tell the superintendent, please follow up with the family.

Similarly, board members acknowledged a lack of understanding regarding the limits of local control in shaping education policy. While some participants recognized that school boards have meaningful power to shape the ways that their districts function, they also admitted that some decisions are mandated by the state with little room for district autonomy (e.g., Covid-related school closures), as Mia explained:

My response on the COVID closures was, "Look, the district doesn't have much recourse. These were policies that were promulgated at the state level, by the Superintendent of Education of Instruction and the governor's office, the County Department of Public Health." Even if we had wanted to do something different, we couldn't.

Whether in navigating emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic or managing the development of ethnic studies curricula, school board members regularly acknowledged the ways that state-level mandates impacted their decision-making. Dana described such constraints as "cookie-cutter," noting potential negative impacts when districts in a state as geographically, politically, and economically diverse as California are required to interpret and follow the same laws and guidelines.

Suggestions for Improving School Board Governance

The reflections of these 10 board members highlight the complex and demanding nature of school board service in today's highly charged political climate. Unlike the frequent media portrayal of school board members as power-seeking individuals using the position as a stepping stone to higher office or to advance a broader ideological agenda, the individuals in our study revealed a genuine commitment to serving their communities in the best interests of students.

Nevertheless, as our findings reveal, members did not always agree on how to fulfil this commitment. Most members agreed on some of the key responsibilities of a school board — such as hiring the superintendent and overseeing finances — and acknowledged the increasing demands of managing crises and responding to outside legal and political pressures. Yet, despite this shared understanding, board members often approached the role with different orientations as Changemakers, Champions, Rule Followers, and/or Representatives, each emphasizing a different understanding of the board's purpose and function.

These varying conceptualizations of their role often showed up in the ways they reported and navigated the day-to-day challenges that they faced. They generally agreed on a common set of challenges, including how to navigate complex relationships, time constraints, limited capacity, demands to use data, shifting technology, political dynamics, and state policies. And though no member had a magic solution for overcoming these challenges, many had developed strategies for negotiating these tensions and strains.

Moreover, their experiences prompt an essential question: What can we learn from these experiences to inform and improve local governance? Though these 10 individuals do not represent all board members in the state, the fairly consistent reports herein suggest several opportunities and recommendations for building stronger school boards.

Supports for Board Members

We recognize that national, state, and local associations, as well as nonprofit organizations, invest heavily in providing training to prospective and sitting board members. Based on our limited research, we have no intentions of commenting on or evaluating that important work. We simply provide the following ideas as ways to reflect on what currently exists and what might be augmented to further support board members in this rapidly changing socio-political context. The experiences and reports from participating SBMs suggest a possible need for more support in the following areas (which we hope to assess and quantify further in our ongoing statewide research):

- **Developing political and civic leadership skills:** Participating SBMs made it quite clear that an increasingly politicized environment and evergreen local power struggles created challenges to confront while serving on the board. To address these challenges, we suggest further conceptualizing around what it means to be a political and civic leader and the skills, knowledge, and dispositions needed to succeed in this role. Other scholars have written about the importance of particular aspects of this leadership for board members, such as the need to establish their “moral purpose” (Campbell & Fullan, 2019) and adopt “courageousness” and “critical consciousness” (Joseph & Rahman, 2024).

Comparable concerns regarding the needs and challenges facing *superintendents* during this particularly volatile time has led to important development of tangible tools, guidebooks, and programs to strengthen their political and civic leadership — including skills and knowledge that help leaders work across differences to facilitate positive outcome for students, such as visioning, relationship-building, political mapping, mobilizing constituent groups, and communication (see, for example, the work of [The Collaborative on Political Leadership in the Superintendency](#)). We believe the position of school board member merits a similar set of investments. Much like superintendents, SBMs are public leaders charged with ensuring access to a high-quality education for every child. As such, they must be given the opportunity to be reflective leaders who make decisions based on a principled vision of what is good for students, and to be given the skills needed to navigate today’s political environment effectively in order to achieve that vision.

- **Engaging with technology:** As our participants shared, increased access to school board decision-making through advances in technology has created both opportunities and challenges for board members. Individuals would benefit from training, strategies, guidelines, and policies that help board members navigate the use of technology — be it guidance on how to prevent harm (e.g., how to engage responsibly with social media, virtual and recorded meetings) and how to positively harness technology (e.g., how to use technology to expand meaningful community engagement).
- **Relationship-building:** Given the extensive time board members devoted to managing relationships and the challenges they faced in the process, we suggest further attention and support be given to the relational aspects of the position. Further guidance on developing and shoring up interpersonal relations with the superintendent, fellow board members, and community groups and individuals would likely benefit prospective and currently serving SBMs. The creative examples highlighted in our report underscore the potential value of learning from the ideas and strategies of seasoned board members.
- **Using data:** With widespread expectations to use data to inform decisions — and limited experience doing so on the part of many — SBMs would benefit from training and support on how to interpret data, determine root causes and potential solutions, while avoiding misinterpretations, biased decisions, and false attributions of problems to students rather than systemic issues. For example, California has invested in a wide array of data sources and systems (e.g., the California Schools Dashboard, the California Cradle-to-Career Data System, the California Healthy Kids Survey), but it is unclear whether board members have the training or capacity to meaningfully interpret and use these tools. Training could also bolster the content knowledge and skills of members who lack educational experience and background knowledge to be more independent in their thinking

and use of data. Board members could benefit from being able to access and interpret data apart from district staff, particularly the superintendent, who they are tasked with evaluating and holding accountable. Local leaders might also consider expanding technology systems to include other types of data or resources, allowing for SBMs to add survey data to their repertoire for investigating ways to improve programs in ways that will improve student outcomes. In addition to more technical training on data use, it may be beneficial to support board members in adopting a mindset of continuous improvement to commit to regularly gathering and using a wider array of data to inform their efforts to improve programs, policies, and outcomes for students (Bryk et al., 2015).

- **Promoting resilience and well-being:** Given the concerns around the general emotional toll of serving, it behooves organizations and associations working with board members to provide spaces for them to collectively reflect on the challenges and stressors and work with others so they feel less alone, more connected, and better able to recharge. For example, many SBMs did not anticipate how challenging the electoral processes would be, both in their initial elections as well as when faced with threats of recall elections, and a few have since decided not to run again. These experiences suggest that board members may benefit from non-partisan, unbiased guidance and support to address both the logistics and emotional toll of election, re-election, or recall elections. As some participants noted, informal networks with SBMs in neighboring districts often provided that refuge and could be replicated throughout the state.

Finally, it should be noted that the needs of SBMs vary greatly based on their context and background. Many SBMs in smaller and rural districts, for example, lacked the same access to support as those from larger districts. Further, SBM with backgrounds in education faced a very different set of challenges than those who did not. As our research showed, SBMs come to this position with varying understandings of their role and purpose. Providing support for someone who views their role to be a Changemaker may be different compared to a board member who sees themselves as a Rule Follower. We do not suggest a one-size-fits-all approach, but instead recommend supports tailored to the specific needs and orientations of SBMs.

Investing in Superintendents and Leadership Teams

Given the great importance participants ascribed to their relationship with their superintendent (and the considerable research backing this up — see, for example, Schwartz & Diliberti, 2022; Sutherland, 2023; White et al., 2023), any consideration of strengthening local governance should include investments in the role of superintendent. As Campbell and Fullan (2019) explain, “governance is not just passing policies; it is what boards and superintendents do together and how they do it” (p. 16). As noted, several of the SBMs leaned heavily on superintendents who provided much-needed guidance and support on how to navigate the challenges explored in this report. Knowing how to build relationships with and mentor SBMs is an important skill that superintendents must develop as well — and the more state and association leaders can do to shore up the skills and well-being of superintendents, the more school board members are likely to thrive in their roles and move past

distractions to focus on ensuring access to a high-quality education. Many trainings and programs already cover this important topic (e.g., California School Boards Association, Association of California School Administrators, California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, National School Boards Association). We simply encourage these existing and emergent supports to include the newer challenges facing boards and superintendents in this rapidly changing, politicized environment, because leading and governing systems — be it from the superintendent or board perspective — must involve collaboration and collective approaches.

State Policies and Incentives

The consistent concerns about political pressures and the time it takes to serve calls for broader discussions around expectations and how to make the responsibilities of the position more manageable and attractive for individuals who have outside responsibilities and limited experience. In addition to the areas of support outlined above, we recommend further dialogue about compensation policies⁷ and other incentives for board members to take on these complex roles.

Similarly, our participants repeatedly raised concerns about the constraints imposed by the Brown Act, suggesting a need for continued conversations about its limitations and affordances. On one hand, the Brown Act can serve as a check on boards that are attempting to enact policies that may not represent their constituents' needs or values. However, it may also limit board members' ability to engage with each other and respond to their communities in ways that best reflect their needs. It may be useful to provide additional clarification to school boards on exactly what the Brown Act requires, as opposed to some potentially relying on “the way we’ve always done things”. Recognizing that some board members may be overinterpreting the limitations of the law, policymakers could consider developing guidelines that ensure the ability to maintain transparency in open meetings, while also allowing for meaningful dialogue among board members and with their communities. Given the advances in technology use in school boards (e.g., live-streaming board meetings, direct engagement on social media), it may be time to refine or revise these parameters.

Additional Research

Finally, this study indicates a need for additional research. Our own ongoing work seeks to build on these findings to understand how the experiences of our participating 10 members relate to those of board members statewide. As part of the Getting Down to Facts III initiative examining the state of California’s education systems, we have recently conducted a state-wide survey of California school board members and plan to share those results in the coming year. This research will also begin to explore even more recent developments in the policy and politics of education — including new federal policies banning diversity, equity and inclusion programs, changes in federal immigration

⁷ CSBA has been actively promoting legislation to increase compensation levels to better reflect the increased responsibilities of board members and inflation, noting that state policy has not been updated in 40 years. At the time of publication, one such bill, AB1390, had passed the state Assembly.

policy enforcement, and funding uncertainties — as well as key associations between local contexts, individuals characteristics, and board members’ reported well-being, self-efficacy, and motivation to continue serving. Future studies could further examine these relationships with causal methods and further examine the impact of support and training on board members, the policies they develop, and district learning outcomes. To attend to the collective nature of board decision-making and further understand the relational dynamics of local governance, we suggest that researchers also broaden case studies to include all of the board members within one board, along with the perspectives of key constituents and staff in the district.

Conclusion

Ultimately, we hope this research contributes to ongoing conversations about the evolving role of school boards in our rapidly changing American society and helps identify opportunities to strengthen and support school boards and those who serve. As long-standing, yet understudied democratic institutions, school boards have historically been used both to sustain and disrupt inequities. In the current political moment, their capacity to serve as stewards of effective and equitable public education merits continued attention from researchers, policymakers, and practitioners.

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