

POLICY BRIEF

CALIFORNIA SCHOOL BOARDS

# NAVIGATING DEMOCRACY IN DIVIDED TIMES

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School boards face increasing challenges from ideological polarization and partisan politics, fast-paced technological change, and a shifting and uncertain policy and funding landscape. While media reports often sensationalize the combative and dysfunctional nature of school board meetings, our research sought to understand the lived experiences of board members who are navigating these turbulent environments. In this policy brief, we summarize findings from our [main report](#), revealing the day-to-day realities of a diverse group of school board members in California. We highlight the significant pressures and constraints they encounter in fulfilling their democratic responsibilities to public schools, including a common set of challenges of navigating complex relationships, time burdens, limited capacity, demands to use data, shifting technology, political dynamics, and state policies. Lastly, we call for new supports and a more deliberate conversation about the role of school boards in a rapidly changing society.

# Introduction

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Local school boards have historically played a major role in public education in the United States. As primarily elected, democratic bodies, boards are intended to provide links between communities and their schools, oversee budgets, set policies, shape curricula, and hold school leaders accountable to students and parents.

Because of this, school boards have also been a common setting for political struggles. National issues ranging from school integration to the teaching of evolution have at times found their way into local school board meetings over the decades. In recent years, partisan conflicts and ideological polarization have infiltrated public discourse and further mired school boards in national politics. What were once matter-of-fact administrative meetings, focused on budget approvals or instructional policies, have now, at times, devolved into hostile debates over social issues. School boards can be hotly contested sites in the political battles over race, diversity, gender, curricula, and public health.

Growing political demands on local schools, along with rapidly changing social contexts, are testing the capacity, legitimacy, and purpose of these critical democratic institutions. The 2024 election and the subsequent executive actions have only intensified the pressures on school boards. Declining enrollments, coupled with increasing uncertainty around federal funding, have further heightened the strains that school systems and their leaders face.

Researchers have long focused on debates over the purpose of public education in the United States. They have even documented how local educational policies shift under the sway of national issues, leading to more competitive and more partisan school board elections. However, limited research has sought to understand how school board members navigate the turbulent social-political waters in which they now find themselves.

We thus focus on the primary research question: *How are school board members experiencing and negotiating their rapidly changing political and social contexts?* In answering this question, we consider how board members understand their roles, the challenges they face, and the strategies they use to navigate these challenging times. We chose to situate our research in California, a state that grants substantial authority to school boards under its Local Control Funding Formula finance and accountability framework, and that is marked by considerable geographic, political, and racial/ethnic diversity.



The full report can be accessed at: [rossier.usc.edu/documents/policyhub-csb1](https://rossier.usc.edu/documents/policyhub-csb1)

# Research Methods

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To explore the nuanced experiences of school board members from across California, we purposely recruited ten members from a diverse set of school districts during the 2023–24 academic year. These board members differed in political ideology, race/ethnicity, gender, background, and experience. Their districts spanned urban, suburban, and rural settings in regions with different local partisan politics.

Our study relied on four main sources of data. We conducted two interviews per participant — one at the beginning of the study and another at the end — each lasting 60–90 minutes. Additionally, every two or three weeks, participants reflected on their work and responded to questions in audio diary entries. We also observed board meetings for some of the participants, providing insight into the public dynamics of their work and board conduct. Finally, we systematically reviewed publicly available materials, including district websites and local media. We coded the transcripts of our interviews and diary entries, as well as the board meeting notes, to arrive at the findings. Following analysis, we shared preliminary findings with participants to elicit feedback and ensure our results accurately reflected their experiences.

## Key Findings

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The school board members we studied offered a wide range of experiences and perspectives. In contrast to the often-sensationalized reports in the media about combative and dysfunctional school boards, our findings highlight the growing challenges that school board members face in navigating politics in their roles, particularly as community members and board members bring divergent perspectives on the responsibilities of boards.

### **Board members agreed on their traditional responsibilities but differed in how they understood their roles.**

Board members articulated a remarkably consistent understanding of their basic responsibilities, which largely aligned with the California School Boards Association guidelines. Board members also consistently described a deep sense of civic commitment, and most embraced a governance philosophy that emphasized representation, community engagement, and equity. However, members varied in how they engaged with these values and how they understood their roles. We identified four primary ways members envisioned their roles:

- Some saw themselves as **Changemakers** — committed to challenging systemic inequities and pushing for transformational change, particularly around racial justice, multilingual learning, and LGBTQ+ inclusion. These members pushed for data-driven decision-making, asked challenging questions during meetings, and worked persistently to shift board practices toward greater effectiveness and accountability.
- Others described themselves as **Champions** — defenders of the district’s mission and the work of educators. They used their positions to advance district goals, promote successes, and shield their communities from outside interference.
- A third group were **Rule-Followers** — emphasizing procedure, legal compliance, and safeguards against overreach. They clearly distinguished themselves as lawmakers rather than activists, and they believed that working within established systems — even when personally disagreeing with specific outcomes — represented responsible governance.
- All members, to varying degrees, identified themselves as **Representatives** — conduits for their communities’ diverse perspectives and values. They engaged in active community listening, attended local events, addressed constituent concerns, and served as fiscal stewards for public funds.

Importantly, most of the members did not hold any of these roles exclusively. They moved between these roles depending on the political context, the issue at hand, and their relationships with other board members and staff.

## Board members faced several key challenges in their work.

### Participants reported significant difficulties in navigating complex relationships.

Board members consistently identified relationship management with fellow board members, superintendents, and the public as central to their roles, and they devoted substantial time and energy to the task. As one member said:

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

School board members viewed their relationships with the superintendent as most 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 board members conducted.

Relationships with fellow board members were also revealed as vital but complex. The need to function as a collective body sometimes conflicted with individual members' backgrounds, values, and campaign commitments. Members described their transitions from being a candidate to collaborative governance, requiring ego management and compromise.

Community relationships were also paramount. But these often created ongoing tensions due to public misunderstanding of board powers and limitations. Some board members explained that many of their constituents believed boards had more direct authority than they actually possess, and often became frustrated when members could not immediately address their concerns due to legal constraints. The one-way nature of public comment, mandated by the Brown Act<sup>1</sup>, further complicated community engagement efforts. Board members often felt they could not address real-time issues directly at meetings.

### **Board members consistently highlighted the intense time commitment of their position.**

They reported spending up to 20 hours a week (some more) in early March 2024 on board-related work — including reviewing lengthy reports or previous minutes, meeting with constituents, holding public events, and attending sessions. These duties were often performed in addition to full-time jobs and busy home lives.

Although the time spent on their duties varied throughout the year for each member, many said the time spent on board activities had increased in recent years. Additionally, board members explained that time constraints contributed to inequity in various ways. Specifically, school boards benefit from having members with diverse experiences and perspectives, they reported, but the time required to be a member, and the inadequate compensation, limited who was able to serve. Some board members explicitly named time constraints as a reason for not running again or for not being as engaged as they believed a board member should be.

### **Some board members hoped for additional training and support.**

The training most members received focused on the legal, ethical, and fiduciary aspects of board service. Many felt this training did not adequately prepare them for the real-world complexities of the role or the issues they increasingly faced. As one member noted:

*... a lot of things that were covered [in trainings] are more legalities like, “Two or more is a meeting” and those kinds of things, and you know, 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 the, you know, how meetings run and things like that.*

Absent training opportunities, board members often drew on their individual backgrounds and experiences to make decisions as a board.

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<sup>1</sup> 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, advanced notice of meeting agendas, opportunities for public participation, individually recorded votes that occur in public, and limits on what can be discussed in closed sessions.

**Board members often used data in decision-making, but many worried about the data they had and their ability to interpret it.**

Every board member expressed a strong interest in data-informed governance, yet they differed in how they accessed, interpreted, and used such information. Although they prioritized test scores, budget indicators, and other quantitative data, several wanted more robust qualitative data, from observations and surveys, to better understand constituent needs and experiences. One member explained:

*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.*

Several members noted challenges in deciphering technical reports and indicated that many of their colleagues lacked the data literacy to do so. Efforts to improve data use included hosting workshops, investing in robust dashboards, and developing clearer templates for reporting. However, many participants still felt under-equipped to meaningfully evaluate policy outcomes, hold superintendents accountable, and address community needs.

**Members found shifts in technology — especially social media usage and online meetings — challenging.**

Some members welcomed the broader reach of technology, especially the greater interactions with the community inside and outside of meetings. Some believed that social media allowed them to reach different audiences than they could before. But others worried that people were not as engaged in meetings online, that meaningful dialogue was being drowned out by viral outrage and ideologically-driven activism. Those in small districts, especially, often lacked the technical support to manage hybrid platforms or counter online misinformation.

**The majority of school board members were challenged by turbulent national, state, and local politics.**

Some found it difficult to balance the competing demands of constituents while also dealing with unexpected confrontations via social media. Several board members acknowledged political polarization and its influence on local behavior, because partisanship drives people to become more adversarial and lose sight of the district's core function. And that partisan conflict could seep into classrooms. One member noted:

*And it's, 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.*

In some districts, political actors attempted to pressure or recall board members over their stances. Several members described adopting defensive or cautious approaches to policymaking. Many members identified COVID as the origin of the political shifts. As parents held increased expectations of what school boards could do for them post-closures, board meetings considerably changed during the pandemic, as one board member detailed, “We lost control during COVID.” Many members also experienced local power grabs and conflicts. A few participants mentioned the specter of labor disputes, while others spoke about conflicts with fellow board members.

Some members described the emotional toll of their work: the burden of making high-stakes decisions, the exhaustion of conflict-laden meetings, and the isolation that can accompany board service. Even in areas not yet impacted, the specter of political conflict exacted a toll.

**Multiple board members were concerned about constraints on their ability to govern due to state policies, such as the Ralph M. Brown Act.**

The Brown Act was enacted to increase transparency in policy-making and prevent back-room deals, but members acknowledged its unintended consequences. Members described the Brown Act as a barrier to trust-building and honest deliberation. It restricted collaboration between members or confused the public about what boards could actually do. As one said, “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.” Another claimed:

*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.*

Members noted that other elected officials did not have the same restrictions imposed on them as were imposed on school boards. 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.

**As they discussed challenges, board members also offered strategies they used to address them.**

Table 1 provides examples of some of the strategies participants used to navigate the seven challenges discussed above.

TABLE 1: Example Strategies Board Members Used to Navigate the Seven Challenges

Challenge	Example Strategies Board Members Used to Navigate Challenges
Navigating complex relationships	Holding informal pre-meeting discussions and social events designed to humanize colleagues across ideological divides; Hosting community workshops at school sites
The burden of time	Distinguishing between activities/duties better suited for district staff and those that rightly call upon their role as representatives
Limited training and support	Meeting with peers in surrounding school boards to discuss challenges and learn promising practices
Using and interpreting data	Devoting collective time during board study sessions to engage in data analysis and meaning-making together
Shifts in technology	Reminding oneself that they are speaking not only to those physically present in the room, but also to the virtual audience and those who might watch the recording at a later date
National, state, and local politics	Reaching out to key leaders before elections to learn about local history, political sensitivities, and potential challenges
State policy constraints	Using board member “comment” period during meetings to publicly recognize community members’ concerns in ways that do not conflict with state laws

# Policy Implications

The experiences we documented point to several critical areas where policy interventions and more support could strengthen school-board governance and support the individuals who serve in these demanding roles. Enacting such changes can help sustain the vitality of California’s school boards as democratic institutions.

- Developing political and civic leadership skills:** To address the challenges of the increasingly politicized environments and local power struggles on boards, we suggest paying greater attention to what it means to be a political and civic leader. School board members are public leaders charged with ensuring access to a high-quality education for every child. They must be given the opportunity to be reflective leaders who make decisions based on a principled vision of what is good for students. They must be supported in further developing the skills and knowledge needed to navigate today’s political environment effectively to achieve that vision, such as how to communicate and work across differences.



- **Engaging with technology:** 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 or how to use technology to expand community engagement.
- **Using data:** Board members would benefit from training and support on how to independently interpret data, determine root causes and potential solutions, while avoiding misinterpretations, biased decisions, and false attributions of problems. Training could also bolster the content knowledge and skills of members who lack educational experience and background knowledge. Local leaders might consider expanding technology systems to include other types of data or resources, allowing members to add survey data to their repertoire, to improve programs in ways that will improve student outcomes.
- **Relationship-building:** Board members devote a significant amount of their time to managing relationships, so we suggest that further attention and support be given to the relational aspects of the position. Further guidance is needed on developing and shoring up interpersonal relations with the superintendent, fellow board members, and community groups and individuals.
- **Promoting resilience and well-being:** It behooves organizations and associations working with board members to provide spaces for them to collectively reflect on the challenges and stressors of their work. They should be provided opportunities to collaborate so they feel less alone, more connected, and better able to recharge. Informal networks with members in neighboring districts often provide that refuge and could be replicated throughout the state.
- **Investing in superintendents and leadership teams:** To strengthen local governance, leaders should also make further investments in the role of superintendent. Knowing how to build relationships with and mentor board members is an important skill that superintendents must develop. The more state and association leaders can do to shore up the skills of superintendents, the more school board members are likely to thrive in their roles and focus on ensuring access to a high-quality education. We encourage existing and emergent supports to include the newer challenges facing boards and superintendents in this rapidly changing, politicized environment.
- **Incentives:** Leaders must find ways to make the responsibilities of school board members more manageable and attractive for individuals who have outside responsibilities and limited experience. We recommend dialogue about compensation policies and other incentives for board members to take on these complex roles.
- **State policies:** There is a need for more conversations about the limitations and affordances of the Brown Act. Leaders should also clarify for board members and the public what the Brown Act requires of school boards. Recognizing that some board members may be overinterpreting the law, policymakers could consider developing guidelines that ensure transparency in open meetings while allowing for meaningful dialogue among board members and with their communities.

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

## Conclusion

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School boards are crucial entry points for civic engagement. Their health and effectiveness are paramount for both educational outcomes and democratic vitality. California school board members navigate a landscape transformed by polarization, complexity, and public scrutiny. School board members also contend with time constraints, relationship complexities, technological disruptions, and external political pressures that extend far beyond traditional educational concerns. Supporting them is not just a matter of sound policy — it is a defense of democracy at the local level.



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