



Advanced Education Policy Leadership Program

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Keeping School Boards on Track


A series of interviews with school leaders

Quotes are illustrative of recurring themes and therefore not attributed to individual respondents.

Policy Question

What can be done to ensure quality school board governance through the election and onboarding process?

“This country and its communities cannot afford to lose its commitment to public education, and that could happen if we are not more careful and aware.”



What is a good school board member?

“Have an open mind and ask questions - not to make trouble, but not to be a rubber stamp.”

“Someone who is willing to find the common ground of we are not all going to get exactly what we want, and the patience to get to the place where everyone can be satisfied with the outcome.”

“Default is trust and respect for the superintendent and administration. Doesn't mean you can't come in seeking change - should come from a reflective, positive standpoint, not from a power perspective.”

“Somebody who cares first and foremost about kids but has a sense of balance about resources that are not unlimited.”

“Ultimately people run because they think they can make a difference (for better or worse). You are doing this because you think you can accomplish something. Need to be able to channel that in a productive way.”

“I think the best school board members are generalists, they don't have heavy duty one item agendas, they love learning about things and want to know about everything. The really great school board members want to ask questions, find out more, and LISTEN to the people on the front line doing the job. Dig into the finances, the facilities issues, but be respectful of the experts.”



School Board Trends

“More that there is burnout on the part of current board members - more retiring board members and no one wants to run. The number of questions at board meetings has gone up in certain districts and board members are burnt out.”

“It’s too unforgiving. And the climate has created a lack of trust. It will result in fewer good people running for office in school boards and other races.”



Electing School Boards

Parties

“Absolutely not. Party lines would be terrible. Party labels would make consensus and working together for common cause much harder. Party labels make it worse by creating more reason to divide, even aligning boards with extremes.”

Timing

“Election timing - off cycle in NY leads to lower turnout, but I still like it better. Not going to get more people out who are going to be any more informed about the actual candidates.”

Money

“No to dark money. Yes, to contribution limits. It’s a school board for God’s sake.”



Training Required

“You have to establish a long culture of right- minded board members who recruited more good people to run for the board. And when a board leader or member went haywire, current, and former board members straightened him out and made him apologize to the new board. It’s up to people who are committed to the district and community to straighten out the people who run and participate for the wrong reasons. Culture must course correct.”



Policy & Practice Recommendations

Legislators:

Mechanisms to keep school board elections non-partisan.

School Boards:

Recommended training and onboarding practices

Local and state education officials, civic leaders, and education advocates should seek the following good government policies to help keep school boards on track:

- Keep school board elections and ballots non-partisan, to promote board teamwork and maintain the focus on students.
- Hold school board elections off cycle from major state and federal races.
- Reject efforts to shorten school board terms, there's too much to learn.
- Limit campaign spending and increase fiscal reporting and transparency by candidates and supporters.
- Require initial training and periodic updates for school board members, either by legislative mandate or expectations of district culture.
- Establish a district culture and operating principles that promote listening, communication, teamwork, difficult conversations and accountability.
- Ensure leaders and organizations who are familiar with the district stay informed, so they can help boards self-correct and get back on track if necessary.