

The Profession

Reviewing Political Science on a Local School Board

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For eight years, I have been a member of my local Board of Education, including two years as its president. While doing what I could to improve the education of 1,500 students annually, I have also broadened my awareness of the relevance of political science to the practical work of government.

My colleagues did not always appreciate my academic specialty. On one occasion, when I made a particularly unrealistic suggestion, the board president (ironically, also a Ph.D. in the field) commented, "There speaks a true political scientist." Yet sometimes the discipline proved helpful to them. For example, we wrestled one evening past midnight with the proposed promotion of a mediocre but highly popular athletic coach. I convinced myself, and some others, to support the appointment by invoking Max Weber's "ethics of responsibility"—surely one of the most arcane considerations ever used in making local educational decisions.

In this informal report, I want to stress the relationships between my limited experience to more general aspects of democracy. School boards, to a great extent, emphasize that strand of democratic thought, exemplified by the ancient Greeks and Rousseau, that focuses on the importance of the community. In these theories of what Jane Mansbridge calls "unitary democracy," citizens voluntarily assume office, repress any private interests, and promote a discoverable common good.

This is the official doctrine, but the surprising reality is that school board behavior largely fits the ideal. Of the twenty board members with whom I served, only one had an unsheathed ax to grind. And he (or, respecting confidentiality, she) gained neither victory nor respect. Board

members receive neither pay nor perquisites more attractive than free tickets to chilly football games. They typically will spend one to two evenings a week on school business, slighting their families and careers, earning the unpleasant rewards of complaints over everything from taxes to crayons. Still, they come each week, to consider the carpeting in the high school library, or the price of grilled cheese sandwiches, or—too rarely—the goals of education.

School board members believe in the doctrine of the common good. In practice, however, they must deal with a more familiar strand of democratic thought. This strand, well represented in our founding political philosophers such as Locke and Madison, focuses on the competition of interests, in conflict and its resolution, and on the winning of immediate victories.

Being Americans, school board members are attracted to this competitive form of politics. In state-wide training sessions of newly elected board members, for example, the most lively discussion in the corridors will be about campaign strategies, not the scheduled topics of parliamentary procedure or curriculum development. There are many reasons for this preference. Election campaigns are exciting, satisfying to the ego (if you win), and clear in the results. In contrast, governing the schools involves considerable tedium, constantly reminds you of the limitations on your "power," and produces few clear results. Having won their seats, school board members often echo Robert Redford's closing line in *The Candidate*: "What do we do now?"

The difference between electioneering and governing is a familiar problem for office-holders, most recently

illustrated by President George Bush's surgery to remove the lips that promised "No new taxes." I believe it is a particular problem for school board members, who are not professional politicians and are therefore less likely to be able to find the appropriate middle way between two opposite temptations. One temptation is to concentrate on winning and holding office, a course sometimes pursued by legislators who over-emphasize "the electoral connection." Since there are few extrinsic rewards, this course is less likely to attract boards of education.

The greater peril for these officials is that they will concentrate too much on governing and neglect their constituents. The anthropologist must beware of "going native," and becoming overly identified with his or her host society. Similarly, a board member must beware of "going professional," and becoming overly identified with the school district's permanent administrators.

It surely is tempting. The voters pay little attention to the schools, unless their children or their wallets are affected; the professionals sincerely devote their lives. The voters are factually uninformed; the professionals know the literature. The voters collectively speak to the board only once a year, when the budget is presented; the professionals talk to the board weekly, sometimes daily. The voters have only one, if powerful, sanction over the board, its potential defeat in the next election (although many will not run for a new term); the professionals have multiple sanctions, from teacher resistance to personal disapproval.

Moreover, the institutional framework fosters this identification. Virtually everything that happens in the schools is the legal responsibility of

the board, from the selection of textbooks to the electricity bills. Yet a sensible board will want its teachers to choose texts and its business manager to order lightbulbs. Having intelligently delegated responsibility, the board then is inevitably in the position of defending decisions that it did not, in fact, make.

A successful school board will be political, in the best sense of the word. It will go beyond the clearly desirable goals undoubtedly held by its members to develop a strategic sense on ways to accomplish these ends. This strategic sense will begin with Harry Truman's doctrine, that effective government basically means "trying to persuade people to do the things they ought to have sense enough to do without persuading them."

The board on which I served was as intelligent and devoted a group as one could find. Almost all were professionals, and usually five of nine members had doctorates. We were genuinely devoted to educational excellence and enthusiastically endorsed the national agenda for change that followed publication of *A Nation at Risk*. In seeking change, we learned some lessons, or at least realized some obvious truths, illustrated here by admittedly idiosyncratic and unreliable case anecdotes.

The first lesson is that good intentions and good policies are not enough. Boards of education, like other political bodies, must go further, working to develop supporting coalitions. We neglected this dictum when we were faced by declining enrollment in foreign language classes. Essentially, we faced a choice between continuing three languages (French, Spanish, and German) with limited opportunity for advanced instruction, or cutting the least popular language, German, in order to provide more years of advanced classes in French and Spanish.

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We opted, as I preferred, to emphasize depth over breadth, but we

did so suddenly, with too little explanation, and with inadequate provision for those students who had already completed the first year of German. The result was a raucous public meeting at which we were accused of everything from causing the national trade deficit to ethnocentrism. The political result was to spur opposition to our budget and to board members running for reelection, contributing to the defeat of both.

Another tough decision provides a contrast. Declining enrollment had led to the closing of a neighborhood elementary school that was now rented, without profit to the board. Located in the most desirable area of town, it was economically attractive to potential developers, and sentimentally attractive to its neighborhood alumni. By selling it, the board could gain a large amount of capital funds for necessary major repairs to the remaining school buildings. Opponents of a sale, mostly those near the school, argued that it should be "stockpiled" against the possibility of future increases in enrollment. One of these residents, another academic, began a vigorous campaign against both the sale and my reelection.

The "facts" favored a sale: enrollment projections indicated a stable or declining student population, and the building, even if reopened, would be very expensive to renovate. More important than the bare facts, however, was convincing the public. We held a series of public meetings, circularized the neighborhood residents, and commissioned outside experts. Following Schattschneider, we broadened the "scope of conflict" by showing how a sale would benefit taxpayers beyond the immediate area and how the proposed sale to a private school for special education would benefit handicapped children. Our final, decisive point was the price: \$2 million for a facility originally appraised at a quarter of that value. Announcing the sale two weeks before the board election also, and not coincidentally, aided my own reelection effort.

To win support, a second rule is Lyndon Johnson's: "you gotta dance with the fella who brung you." To effectuate democratic control, a school board must remind itself that

it is the representative voice of the voters, not the public organ of the school professionals. It should trust its own sense of values and priorities. Its governmental model should be the idealized Congress, providing direction, oversight, a healthy skepticism, and only conditional support in regard to the executive branch. It should avoid the closed if cozy relationships of a British cabinet or the "iron triangles" of congressional committees, lobbyists, and federal regulatory agencies. If war is too important to be left to generals, schools are too important to be left to educators.

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On infrequent occasions, I and other board members forgot this rule. Sympathetic to the problems of dedicated professionals, we sometimes were too sympathetic. An important instance came when the school system went through its periodic state assessment. Although generally evaluated highly, the district failed to meet some of the state's standards. The most important of these was inadequate performance in mathematics by sixth-grade pupils. That failure was actually due to poor supervision by an administrator, but the board accepted the blame. It was noble to protect the administrator, but a political mistake.

Mathematics instruction also provides a contrasting example. Re-

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sponding to parental complaints, the board was unhappy with the level of instruction for high-achieving elementary students and with test scores of low-achieving high schoolers. We were offered various rationalizations: algebra would be harmful to the health of twelve-year-olds, geometry shouldn't be taught before the tenth grade, even though tested by the state in ninth grade. Aided by new administrators sharing its goals, the board acted. It set specific goals for improved performance in math and insisted that the professionals find ways to achieve these goals. Given a clear mandate, teachers and administrators overcame the alleged problems and met the board mandate.

Changing the schools requires more than this kind of occasional intervention. Board members are amateurs, busy people, and transitory officials. My third rule is that successful boards of education must institutionalize change within the professional establishment itself. Educators themselves recognize this principle. They emphasize that programs should be "proactive" and that the staff must "buy in" to change (cliques as irritating as political science's jargon).

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Yet in education, the structural imperatives (not to coin a phrase) are largely opposed to change. The people who choose careers in teaching are generally more concerned with personal security than with innova-

tion. The environment of schools is generally hierarchical and non-participatory, isolating teachers from one another. Career advancement depends largely on years of service, rather than originality. Administrators are mostly recruited from the inside and, in New Jersey, given tenure in their executive positions after three years. There is little direct competition, and few market tests of success. The inertial forces are so great that even the brightest flames are prone to early burnout.

Seeking change within these severe limits, my board futilely exchanged the positions held by its tenured administrators. An ineffective superintendent became an inefficient business administrator. Two mediocre elementary school principals were switched. One became a colossal failure in the new school; the other became an embarrassing insubordinate. Eventually, all were persuaded to retire, not without significant financial cost.

Other strategies have been more effective. By creating a new assistant superintendent for curriculum, we have established line responsibility for instructional change. Individual grants to teachers have encouraged classroom innovation. Hiring outside evaluators of specific programs have provided more objective measures of success while making the district's teachers more aware of current research findings. Giving parents power to override some school decisions, e.g., on placement of their children in reading levels, has provided a check on the professionals.

There are other measures that are now discussed and may prove useful, in this district and nationally, but none are a panacea for the evident ills of American education. School-based management may free teachers to use their talents more fully, but it may also become only a means to protect teachers from parents or to

advantage the children of the few participating parents. Market competition among schools may free parents from the strictures of the "one best system" that dominates our schools, but it may also add to the disadvantages of our most needy children. Budget limitations may force administrators to re-examine their priorities, but it may also mean that we only buy inexpensive pencils when we need costly computers. Limitations of terms of office will lessen the risk of "capture" of board members, but may leave professionals less subject to informed oversight.

Ultimately, the proximate solutions to these insoluble problems are simple to state and difficult to achieve. Hire the best people you can find, provide necessary but limited resources, watch them carefully, stick to a few programs over the long haul, and emphasize implementation over policy declarations.

As I leave my colleagues, I remain hopeful because I have experienced the dedication of these democratic activists and the devotion characteristic of most school professionals. I urge political scientists, and other citizens, to take up public office, to serve, and to learn. But, in so doing, they must remember Weber's caution: "Only he has the calling for politics who is sure that he shall not crumble when the world from his point of view is too stupid or too base for what he wants to offer."

About the Author

Gerald M. Pomper is professor of political science at the Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University. After a sabbatical at Australian National University, he will return to his small town in New Jersey, deliberately unidentified in this essay.