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## Decision-Making: School Boards From A Political Perspective

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In recent years political scientists have begun to pay closer attention to the educational process and the impact it has on politics. Most notably the subdiscipline of political socialization has emerged and several researchers in this area have attributed major importance to the schools in the socialization process. Paralleling this emerging interest in schools as agents of political socialization has been a growing concern by political scientists about the way educational decisions are made. In this study we focus upon this concern by examining several aspects of the decisional process of local school boards. Based on data collected in Kentucky and Florida a number of findings are reported.

Initially, we might address the question of why political scientists would be interested in school boards. Several reasons are readily apparent.<sup>1</sup> School boards are responsible for the governance of the largest number of governmental units existent in the United States; currently, there are more than 15,000 school districts in this country. In fact, except for national defense, the running of public schools is the most extensive and expensive governmental activity in the United States.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, school boards are involved in *politics* as most of us define that term, *i.e.*, the making of authoritative decisions which affect relatively large numbers of people. In addition to the extremely sensitive issue of what is to be taught and what is to be read, there are the more traditional political questions of who is to be hired and where and how much money is to be spent. In terms of jobs, hundreds of local school boards in rural and small-town school districts provide the major source of both professional and nonprofessional employment opportunities in the community. In terms of finances, school board budgets are often larger than those of city and county governments.

<sup>1</sup> See for example, Thomas H. Eliot, "Toward an Understanding of Public School Politics," *American Political Science Review*, 52 (December, 1959), 1032-51.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* See also David W. Minar, *Educational Decision-Making in Suburban Communities* (Washington: U. S. Office of Education, Cooperative Research Report No. 2440, 1966).

Second, school board members are usually elected, with important representational responsibilities to the people who elected them. Political scientists need to explore how board members perceive and carry out this representational function.

Third, there are some obvious similarities between school board members and policy-makers in other areas. Students of urban politics have often observed the similar legal relationships between the city council and the city manager compared to that between the school board and the superintendent of schools. However, little analysis has been presented as to the ways these relationships are alike and in what ways they differ.<sup>3</sup> There is some evidence to suggest that in some respects school board members resemble, with a few significant exceptions, city councilmen and state legislators in their background, attitudes, and behavior.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, political scientists need to examine school board decision-making because educational researchers, in studying school boards, have tended to virtually ignore the topics mentioned above. While educational researchers have devoted considerable time and space to school boards, in most cases they imply that the school board is a set of non-political actors isolated from other forms of policy-making whose only significant function is to choose and support a competent superintendent. Given our earlier arguments, this is surely an incomplete picture which requires additional examination and a different perspective.

#### *External Constraints on Local Decision Making*

In discussing decision-making by local school boards, we need to acknowledge that there are severe constraints on the amount of discretion that they have in the decisional process. Actions of the federal government, state governments, and nongovernmental groups like teachers' organizations have clearly tended to limit the policy-making powers of local boards. While we disagree with those who argue that contemporary school boards are nearly devoid of power,<sup>5</sup> it is obvious that these external agents play a major role in setting the boundaries within which school board decisions are made.

<sup>3</sup> See R. J. Snow, *Local Experts: Their Role as Conflict Managers in Municipal and Educational Government* (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1966).

<sup>4</sup> Roberta S. Sigle and Wolfgang Pindur, "Legislature Behavior and Perceptions of Public Opinion," a paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C., 1968.

<sup>5</sup> For example, in *Shaping Educational Policy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), James B. Conant lists five groups which determine educational policy, but omits school boards from his list.



The impact of the federal government is apparent to most observers. Perhaps the most far-reaching action taken at the national level was the 1954 Supreme Court decision on school desegregation and the several subsequent court decisions and administrative directives designed to implement it. This federal action has affected a substantial number of school boards during almost every school year since 1954 and has an impact on some urban school districts virtually every week. More recently national level decisions on bussing—judicial, congressional, and presidential—have had a similar effect. Other federal decisions which have limited local decision-making would include, for example, federal court decisions involving school prayer and Bible reading, congressional decisions on levels of educational appropriations together with presidential decisions on whether to spend what Congress has appropriated, and recent legislative and administrative action involving sex discrimination (Title IX).

State governments also provide important limitations on what school boards can do. Three examples come quickly to mind. State Departments of Education provide fairly explicit criteria relating to teacher certification. These regulations clearly limit the discretion school boards have in hiring professional personnel. In addition, many state legislatures have passed laws regulating (and often requiring) collective bargaining for teachers. These state-level decisions have great impact on local boards, involving both budgeting decisions and decisions relating to the power to control many aspects of the board-teacher relationship. Finally, and most importantly, state-level decisions on levels of state aid severely limit the decisional scope of local school boards. Most school boards must postpone ultimate budgetary decisions until they learn what governors, state legislatures, and state educational bureaucracies have determined will be their share of the annual state education budget.

A third significant force constraining local decision-making is the presence of teachers' organizations. These groups, which provide local, state, and national affiliations, have the potential for severely limiting the options of local decision-makers. In school districts where collective bargaining agreements have been negotiated, as much as 80% of a district's budget may be committed by the contract. There are obvious regional and local variations to consider and it be noted that teachers' organizations have tended to be less influential in the South than elsewhere. Nonetheless, within this regional generalization, the significance of teachers' organizations as a restraining force upon local school board decision-making varies. Our research indicates that teachers' organiza-

tions in Kentucky have relatively little influence while those in Florida are emerging as a force with which to be reckoned.

Before concluding this discussion, it should be acknowledged that the general public could constitute an additional restraint upon school board decision-making. Yet, the bulk of the literature on school boards suggests that the public has a very limited impact upon the decisional processes of school boards. There are several reasons for this, a number of which are interrelated. Nominations to the school board are often controlled by the superintendent and/or incumbent board members. This ability of the board effectively to control who will serve upon it has led some scholars to refer to the school board as a "self-perpetuating" institution.<sup>6</sup> Another limit on public involvement is the non-partisan nature of virtually all school board elections. Partly as a result of controlled nominations and non-partisan elections school board elections usually produce substantially lower voter turnouts than other elections.<sup>7</sup> In addition, school board members tend to be unrepresentative of their constituencies, especially in terms of age, occupation, and socio-economic status, and are inclined to be unresponsive to public opinion.<sup>8</sup> As a consequence of these and other factors, school boards are much more inclined to look inward—to the school superintendent and his staff—when they prepare to make decisions, rather than looking to the public. This brings us to the major element in the school board decisional process, the relationship of the board to the superintendent.

### *The Superintendent—Dominated School Board*

Recent literature relating to school board decision-making (most of which has been written by non-educators) suggests that superintendents can and usually do "dominate" their school boards. Several factors have contributed to this situation. As mentioned earlier, superintendents often are able to control who serves on their board. Thus, many board members assume their positions already indebted to the superintendent.

<sup>6</sup> One tactic which is used for retiring board members to resign before their term expires, thus allowing the remaining board members (influenced by the superintendent) to name a successor, who will then enjoy the advantage of incumbency at the next election. This practice was first described in Keith Goldhammer, "Community Power Structure and School Board Membership," *American School Board Journal*, 130 (March, 1955), 27-8.

<sup>7</sup> Roscoe C. Martin, "School Government," in *Governing Education*, (ed), Alan Rosenthal (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1969), 273-5.

<sup>8</sup> The unrepresentative character of school board members has been documented in a multitude of studies, beginning with George S. Counts, *The Social Composition of Boards of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1927). By 1953, W.W. Charters had located more than 60 separate studies of this nature; see Charters, "Social Class Analysis and the Control of Public Education," *Harvard Educational Review*, 23 (Fall, 1953). At the present time, the National School Boards Association is in the process of updating this literature.



Two other reasons for the dominant role of the superintendent involve the concepts of "professionalism" and "insulation" which are widely accepted in the educational literature.<sup>9</sup> Professionalism refers to the notion that the superintendents are the professionals, *i.e.*, the "experts," and that school boards must rely upon their expertise as they make decisions. Board members are continually socialized to accept this premise in training sessions and in the numerous manuals written for them.<sup>10</sup> Particularly, they are urged to accept the superintendent's advice and recommendations concerning the educational program, *i.e.*, in decisions relating to curriculum, textbooks, and the hiring of professional personnel. Similarly, they are encouraged to focus their efforts toward the non-educational (and less sensitive) areas of decision-making, for example, decisions involving new buildings, site selections for these buildings, legal requirements, and financial matters.<sup>11</sup> Thus, their attention is diverted from the crucial decisions which are made regarding the entire structural program.

Closely related to the "professionalism" concept is the doctrine of insulation. Beginning in the early years of this century, school administrators have argued that decision-making for schools should be kept separate from other forms of political decision-making. The impact of this insulation of educational decision-makers from traditional partisan politics has been discussed by a number of social scientists.<sup>12</sup> It is sufficient here to observe that one major result has been to focus the attention of the school board toward the superintendent, and eliminate the necessity for him to compete with other centers of political power in the community, thus greatly enhancing his influence over the board in the decisional process.

Two additional and more specific aspects of the decision-making process have also enhanced the superintendents' influence. These involve the level of conflict deemed legitimate on school boards, and the distinction between policy and administration. The educational literature has stressed the need to reduce or eliminate conflict in education, at almost any cost. School board members are warned in articles and manuals

<sup>9</sup> See Phillip J. Meranto, *School Politics in the Metropolis* (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill, 1970), Chapter 1.

<sup>10</sup> See especially Norman D. Kerr, "The School Board as an Agency of Legitimation," *Sociology of Education*, 38 (Fall, 1964), 34-59. An early example of a school board manual is Daniel R. Davies and Fred W. Hosler, *The Challenge of School Board Membership* (New York: Chartwell House, 1949); see p. 12 and Chapter 8. A recent example is Michael Y. Nunnery, *Effective Educational Leadership: The School Board-Superintendent Team* (Tallahassee: Florida School Boards Assoc., 1972), esp. 20-1.

<sup>11</sup> See works by Kerr and Minar, cited above.

<sup>12</sup> Meranto, Chapter 1. See also Frederick M. Wirt and Michael W. Kirst, *The Political Web of American Schools* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1972), 5-11.

written for them about the direct consequences of division. These writings apparently fail to recognize the possibility of genuine differences of opinion, or the potential need to represent diverse points of view. On many school boards the usual consequence of accepting the no-conflict norm has been to accept without dissent virtually every recommendation of the superintendent because he is the "expert." While a trend may be developing whereby conflict is acknowledged as both legitimate and useful the no-conflict norm is still widely accepted by board members and administrators.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, we move to the policy-administration dichotomy with which so many of us in political science are familiar. Even though students of public administration have long since ceased to attempt to draw sharp distinctions between these two spheres of decision-making, school administrators, by warning of the negative consequences which would occur should board members exercise administrative action, often are able to use the rhetoric of dichotomy to their advantage.<sup>14</sup> Thus, it is not surprising that the policy-making area, which is acknowledged to be the legitimate concern of school boards, is defined very narrowly and tends again to restrain school board action on the sensitive educational issues alluded to earlier.

If the superintendent and his administrative staff have this kind of power over school boards, what function remains for the board to perform? Norman Kerr, in an extremely provocative and compelling article, has argued that this situation has resulted in school boards being relegated to the role of legitimizers. He terms the school board an agency of legitimation, legitimating the actions of the administration of the community, rather than representing the desires of the community to the administration.<sup>15</sup> This, in effect, echoes Thomas Eliot who called public school politics "representative democracy turned upside down."<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, Kerr's research, which was based on only two school districts, never has been adequately followed up. Thus, in the remainder of this research, using empirical data collected in two Southern states, we will explore some of the decisional aspects discussed above.

<sup>13</sup> An example of this point of view is Edward M. Tuttle, *School Board Leadership in America* (Danville, Ill.: Interstate Printers & Publishers, 1958), see esp. 30, 98, & 129. This position has been articulated recently at the 1974 and 1975 Conventions of the National School Boards Association.

<sup>14</sup> One example, of many which could be cited, is Archie R. Dykes, *School Board and Superintendent: Their Effective Working Relationships* (Danville, Ill.: Interstate Printers & Publishers, 1965), 106-17. The Nunnery manual (cf. footnote 10) makes the distinction (p. 10) but later notes that it is not always possible to clearly distinguish between the two areas of activity (p. 23).

<sup>15</sup> Kerr, 34-37.

<sup>16</sup> Eliot, 1034.



*Patterns of School Board Decision-Making in Kentucky and Florida*

With perhaps one exception, the findings in these two Southern states generally conform to the patterns described above. We will focus on three aspects of decision-making: superintendent-dominance, school board relationships to the public, and school board conflict. Data relating to superintendent dominance are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Data relating to the other two decisional areas are presented in Tables 3 and 4. These data were collected using self-administered questionnaires which were mailed to all board members in both states. The response rate in Kentucky, where data were collected in early 1972, was about 56%, generating a total sample of 528. The response rate in Florida, where data were collected in 1974, was about 35%, generating a total sample of 126. While both samples appeared to be generally representative of all school districts in each state, obviously the Kentucky sample provides a more reliable picture of school board decision-making, because of the sample size and response rate.

*Superintendent Dominance.* In Tables 1 and 2 we observe that school board members in both Kentucky and Florida admit to being dominated by their superintendents in most decisional areas. Very few of the respondents perceived that school boards played a leading role in making decisions on any of these items. Moreover, a substantial number confessed total lack of involvement in some of the crucial educational areas discussed earlier.

Superintendent dominance was most apparent in the "Instruction" category (curriculum, textbooks, and teaching methods) where approximately 40% of the respondents in both states saw this as entirely within the superintendent's decisional realm, and where less than 5% saw any significant board involvement. Superintendent dominance was also very evident in the budget making area (Kentucky) and in Personnel and Hiring (Florida).

Superintendents appear to be somewhat less dominant in decisions involving new buildings (both states), public relations (especially in Kentucky), and salaries (especially in Florida). We suspect the greater Florida board involvement in salary decisions reflects a situation in which boards are facing a newly imposed collective bargaining law, which has undoubtedly forced them to give closer attention to salary levels, probably against their will. In fact, other data from Michigan (not reported here) suggests that collective bargaining will tend to involve boards more extensively in many of the decisional areas being discussed. If this is true, it is somewhat ironic, given the intense opposi-



TABLE 1  
*Superintendent-Board Division of Labor in Kentucky*

<i>Decisional Area</i>	<i>Number Responding</i>	<i>Superintendent<sup>a</sup> dominates</i>	<i>Superintendent<sup>b</sup> leads</i>	<i>Board<sup>c</sup> leads</i>	<i>Board<sup>d</sup> dominates</i>
Personnel & Hiring .....	515	15.7%	80.8%	2.7%	0.8%
Budget .....	512	26.2	69.5	3.7	0.6
Public Relations .....	506	8.1	69.2	21.1	1.6
New Buildings .....	510	4.1	73.5	20.6	1.8
Teachers' Grievances .....	506	17.0	71.3	11.1	0.6
Salaries .....	513	14.6	74.5	9.6	1.4
Instruction .....	438	39.5	56.8	3.4	0.2

Wording in the questionnaire for each response category:

<sup>a</sup> "The business is usually handled entirely by the superintendent."

<sup>b</sup> "The business is handled by both board and superintendent, with the superintendent taking the lead."

<sup>c</sup> "The business is handled by both board and superintendent, with the board taking the lead."

<sup>d</sup> "The Business is usually handled entirely by the board."

(Some percentage do not total to 100.0% due to rounding)

TABLE 2  
*Superintendent-Board Division of Labor in Florida*

<i>Decisional Area</i>	<i>Number Responding</i>	<i>Superintendent<sup>a</sup> dominates</i>	<i>Superintendent<sup>b</sup> leads</i>	<i>Board<sup>c</sup> leads</i>	<i>Board<sup>d</sup> dominates</i>
Personnel & Hiring .....	126	43.7%	52.4%	4.0%	0.0%
Budget .....	125	8.8	79.2	12.0	0.0
Public Relations .....	124	17.7	56.5	25.8	0.0
New Buildings .....	126	7.1	69.8	21.4	1.6
Teachers' Grievances .....	125	22.4	60.0	16.0	1.6
Salaries .....	126	6.3	62.7	30.2	0.8
Instruction .....	125	41.6	53.6	4.0	0.8

Wording in the questionnaire for each response category:

- a "The business is usually handled entirely by the superintendent."
- b "The business is handled by both board and superintendent, with the superintendent taking the lead."
- c "The business is handled by both board and superintendent, with the board taking the lead."
- d "The Business is usually handled entirely by the board."

(Some percentage do not total to 100.0% due to rounding)



TABLE 3  
*Representational Role—In Kentucky and Florida*

Role Orientation	Kentucky	Florida
Delegate <sup>a</sup> .....	12.8%	15.4%
Trustee <sup>b</sup> .....	87.2	84.6
	100.0%	100.0%
Number of Respondents .....	515	123

<sup>a</sup> "He should do what the public wants him to do, even if it isn't his own personal preference."

<sup>b</sup> "He should use his own judgment, regardless of what others want him to do."

TABLE 4  
*Levels of Intra-Board Conflict in Kentucky and Florida*

Conflict Level	Kentucky	Florida
Very Low .....	5.5%	0.0%
Low .....	60.6	34.1
Moderate .....	29.7	49.2
High .....	4.2	16.7
	100.0%	100.0%
Number of Respondents .....	525	126

tion to collective bargaining by most organizations of school board members.

Thus, these data clearly support our earlier analysis relating to the relationship of school boards to superintendents. Not only are superintendents clearly dominant in the decision-making process, but they are most dominant in the more crucial areas involving what is to be taught, who will teach, and where the educational dollar will be spent. Kerr's description of boards being relegated to less important tasks like deciding about new buildings is accurate for our respondents. More important, these data seem to provide support for his characterization of boards as "agencies of legitimation," particularly the responses in the "public relations" decisional area.

*Relationship to the Community.* Most political scientists are familiar with the concept of representational role orientation, originally applied to state legislators by Wahlke and Eulau.<sup>17</sup> We have used this concept to help ascertain the board member's perception of his constituency. In our research, we forced respondents to choose between the two orientations, delegate or trustee, not allowing them an "in-between" choice, as is offered by some legislative scholars. Almost all respondents were willing to make the choice between the two extremes.

As the data in Table 3 indicates the vast majority of board members, approximately 85% in each state, chose the "trustee" response, seeing the school board member as someone who ". . . should use his own judgment, regardless of what others want him to do." A mere handful opted for the "delegate" role in which the board member would ". . . do what the public wants him to do even if it isn't her own personal preference." While most legislative researchers have found more trustees than delegates,<sup>18</sup> the overwhelming proportion found here suggests that the representational concept and the obligation to express the views of a constituency is less well-developed among school board members than among other elected representatives.<sup>19</sup> These perceptions may well result from the "insulation" of school board members from partisan politics, discussed earlier. In any case, this finding reinforces our earlier assertions regarding the board members inclination to look inward, to the administration, rather than to the public when making a decision.

Other research relating to the board member's representational role suggests that the size of constituency, the state's political culture, and the individual's level of education may affect the relative number of trustees and delegates. For example, in Kentucky we discovered that college-educated board members were more likely than high school graduates to be trustees. However, board members who had not completed high school were more likely to be trustees than either high school or college graduates.<sup>20</sup> Other studies have suggested that board members from small constituencies as well as board members from non-Southern states are more likely to be delegates.<sup>21</sup> These assertions are

<sup>17</sup> John Wahlke, *et al.*, *The Legislative System* (New York: Wiley, 1962).

<sup>18</sup> Malcolm E. Jewell and Samuel C. Patterson, *The Legislative Process in the United States* (New York: Random House, 2nd ed., 1973), Chapter 16, particularly pp. 420, 421, and 423.

<sup>19</sup> Nationally most school board members are elected; a small percentage are appointed. In Kentucky and Florida all board members are elected.

<sup>20</sup> Paul D. Blanchard, "Most School Board Members are Their Own Men . . .," *American School Board Journal*, 161 (May, 1974), 47-8.

<sup>21</sup> See Sigel and Pindur, cited above; see also Paul D. Blanchard, "School Board Decision-Making: Results of a Michigan Survey," unpublished manuscript.



made on the basis of very little evidence, however, indicating the need for more intensive study of the school board member as a representative.

*School Board Conflict.* The presence and level of conflict which exists on a school board is an important decisional variable, since conflict is central to most definitions of politics, and because conflict is so closely related to other aspects of decision-making. For example, it is logical to assume that a board which is nearly or always unanimous is more likely than a non-unanimous board to be a board which is less involved in decision-making and is a "rubber-stamp," superintendent-dominated board.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, we can similarly assume that a unanimous board would be one which would be less likely to represent the diverse points-of-view in the constituency, if such diversity exists. Thus, school board conflict is clearly related to the two decisional aspects already discussed.

In Table 4 data are reprinted indicating the conflict level on boards of education in Florida and Kentucky, based on respondents' perceptions. In both states conflict levels were higher than expected. These data were mildly surprising, providing the only departure from our expectations based on the literature review presented earlier. In Kentucky we discovered that about one-third of the respondents reported substantial (*i.e.*, moderate or high) conflict levels. In Florida twice as many respondents, nearly two-thirds, reported substantial conflict. The higher levels of conflict in Florida probably can best be explained by the size of the constituency. School districts in Florida tend to be much larger than those in Kentucky. Thus, Florida boards are more likely to represent a diversity of opinion. In addition, the collective bargaining situation in Florida, mentioned earlier, would be more likely to generate substantial levels of conflict.

In interpreting these data on school board conflict, we are somewhat more optimistic about the ability of school boards to exercise the decision-making function which is legally theirs. These data suggest that at least some school boards are not simply acting as "rubber stamps" for the superintendent, are not attempting to conceal genuine differences of opinion, and that they may be giving more time and independent study to the decisions they are called upon to make. If this truly manifests a trend in educational decision-making then perhaps the evidence will soon emerge in other areas of the decisional process. We

<sup>22</sup> Paul D. Blanchard, "Conflict and Cohesion in Kentucky School Boards," in *School Board Conflict, Cohesion, and Professional Negotiation*, (ed.) Charles F. Faber (Lexington, KY: Bureau of School Service, 1973), 37-75.

would argue that this possibility necessitates continuing study of school boards, especially by political scientists.

### *Recommendations and Additional Concerns*

Besides the need for additional research, the findings presented here suggest several possible recommendations for bringing about more effective and responsive school board decision-making. First, school boards need to re-establish their legitimate and legal authority to make policy. One potential way to accomplish this would be for boards to establish written policy statements, preferably after public hearings. The establishment of written policies is being strongly encouraged by the National School Boards Association, many state school boards association, and by state departments of education. In some states policies are legally mandatory in enumerated categories. Even though many school boards undoubtedly adopt without change policies recommended by the superintendent, this process does encourage greater board involvement and promotes greater awareness of the board's policy-making responsibility.

Another possible way to re-establish board authority would be for boards to hire their own staffs in order to provide them with an independent source of information. This would help free them from being "captives" of the limited amount of information they often are provided by the superintendent. The idea of independent professional staffs for school boards is a controversial one in educational circles and is often seen as a threat to the superintendent's ability to lead and to the unity of the board-superintendent "management team."

A second recommendation, easy to make but more difficult to implement, is for board members to be made more aware of their responsibility to represent and be responsive to the public. This might occur naturally in this age of "consumerism." Another way to promote this objective would be for political scientists to continue to pay attention to and exhibit concern about school boards, perhaps helping to "re-socialize" them in the direction of greater representativeness.

Finally, school boards need to be assured that school board conflict is not inherently negative nor a sign of weakness. They need to be encouraged not to suppress genuine differences of opinion and to be convinced that in the diverse society in which we live, conflict is often inevitable. Again, political scientists can and should play a leading role in this educative process. Our experience suggests that many school board members would be quite receptive to the consulting assistance which political scientists could provide them in the area of conflict-resolution and conflict-management.



As political scientists, we make these recommendations based upon our belief that school boards are the legal and legitimate policy-making bodies but that they can only effectively exercise this authority as they function as genuine representatives of the public. Only as school boards move in these directions will they begin to resolve the many serious and significant problems which exist in the local school district.