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Public school privatizer Fordham Institute casts doubt on the efficacy of the role of local boards of education in their October 9, 2025, Flypaper publication.

Fordham Institution is one of America's leading advocates for the privatization of public education. Like other education privatizers, Fordham folks batter traditional public education as they advocate for privatization.

Teachers' unions have been under attack for decades. The Reagan Administration in the 1980s was particularly opposed to teachers' unions for political reasons. Possibly the fabricated 1983 Nation at Risk report was a manifestation of Reagan's disdain for teachers' unions. Public education was blamed for a sagging economy, thus a Nation at Risk.

The Nation at Risk debacle launched a savage assault on public education. Boards of education came under scrutiny as a potential cause for perceived problems inherent in the public common school system.

The Brookings Institution commissioned John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe to write a report (book) on the status of "reform" in public education. The book, Politics, Markets and America's Schools, was published in 1990. Chubb and Moe concluded that government has not solved the education problem because government is the problem. President Reagan was fond of saying that government can't solve the problem because government is the problem. Possibly Chubb and Moe picked up on the Reagan slogan.

Chubb and Moe proposed that public education be controlled by markets and parental choice, instead of states and communities by way of democratic processes. Their assumption was that public education was a failure and the solution was to remove control from boards of education. Democracy was the problem, in their opinion.

On March 4th, 2014, Billionaire Netflix CEO, Reed Hastings delivered the keynote speech to the California Charter School Association's annual conference. In that keynote speech, Mr. Hastings made a shocking statement: Democratically elected school board members are the problem with education, and they must be replaced by privately held corporations in the next 20-30 years.

The Fordham folks are weighing in on a 3 to 4 decades campaign to eliminate public school boards of education. Of course, boards stand in the way of the education privatization movement.

School board members are wearing rose-colored glasses

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The United States has more school board members than any other group of elected leaders—more than state legislators, more than city councilors. Even after many district consolidations over the past century, we still have over 13,000 school districts, virtually every one with its own board.

Despite its ubiquity and durability, however, the local school board is actually a pretty weird political institution. Since the Progressive Era, most board elections have been designed to "de-politicize" education, and consequently, they are often uncontested and held in odd corners of the calendar when few people vote, which means they're often dominated by candidates with ties to the education establishment.

Yet school boards are also an enigma. Another vestige of the Progressive Era is that their elections are typically nonpartisan, meaning the ideological leanings and policy instincts of school board candidates are less obvious than for candidates in most other elections. And discussions about teaching, learning, school effectiveness, and pupil achievement, which would seem to be a school board's chief reason for existing, are often notably absent from these elections—and then from board agendas. The typical school board

meeting is more often focused on problems such as facilities management and labor issues than on academics, even as board decisions increasingly intersect with larger political battles, often culture war issues rather than the “three Rs.”

At a time when the country faces acute achievement challenges—just look at the latest NAEP results!—this must be termed misguided if not tragic.

To better understand the state of school boards today, we turned to two seasoned experts, Boston College’s Michael Hartney and George Mason University’s David Houston, to conduct our latest study, *Who’s on Board? School Boards and Political Representation in an Age of Conflict*. It includes perhaps the most ambitious survey of these groups ever attempted, with data from more than 5,000 board members in 3,093 distinct school districts, and sheds light on who America’s school board members are today, what they believe, and how their perspectives compare with the general public. Unlike most earlier surveys of school board members, Hartney and Houston were able to could compare board members’ responses to the beliefs of the American public, using questions modeled after those found in recent national surveys. They could also draw on the results of a 2001 survey of school board members that asked many of the same questions about their racial, ethnic, and other demographic identities, enabling comparisons of school board characteristics over time.

What emerges is a complicated portrait, with school board members relatively well-aligned with their constituents in some ways and notably less so in others. The authors find that board members are more likely to be White and college-educated than the nation as a whole. That is, in part, because of the country’s many rural and small-town school districts, which themselves are disproportionately White, but it holds even after adjusting for district size. The views of board members, meanwhile, diverge from those of typical Americans on some important issues. For example, the report finds that board members are unusually hostile to charter schools when compared to the public at large (and even more so when compared with Black adults). At the same time, board members view the performance of *their own districts* through rose-colored glasses, grading them far higher than their constituents do.

Taken together, these findings reveal fundamental tensions at the heart of school governance, and they suggest that the nation’s most local form of democracy may, in important ways, be drifting out of step with its citizens.

Who governs?

School board members look even more different from the nation as a whole than they used to. Most notably, as America has become significantly more Hispanic in recent decades, the proportion of school board members who are Hispanic hasn’t budged, even as the share of members who are Black has fallen. This means that, while the percentage of Americans who are White is down 10 percentage points since 2001, the share of school board members who are White has actually *risen* during the same period. (The gender gap, however, has closed.) (Table 1).)

Read online to view Table 1: School board members are more White and more educated than the public.

Note: For details on the methodology, see the full report.

Nationwide, there are similar proportions of Democrats, Republicans, liberals, and conservatives on school boards compared to all U.S. adults. However, once the authors account for district size, they find that board members lean further to the left. Enrollment-weighted estimates show that 35 percent of board members call themselves liberals and 55 percent—a majority—are Democrats. Among the U.S. public, just one in four identifies as liberal and 43 percent are Democrats.

This is not the first time that observers have noted a representational mismatch in American governance. Congress, for instance, has long been Whiter, more affluent, and better educated than the general public. But the fact that school boards exhibit similar gaps raises important questions about their legitimacy and responsiveness.

The most anti-charter group in the country?

When it comes to actual education issues, board members' beliefs and priorities are often out of step with that of their communities. The attitudes of board members toward charter schools are perhaps the starkest example. With the exception of teachers' unions, school boards are likely the most charter-averse constituency in K–12 education.

Fifty-nine percent of their members oppose charter-school formation, while only 29 percent support it. Among the U.S. public, the pattern is reversed: 45 percent support charters, while just 36 percent oppose. The divide is even more pronounced when racial differences are taken into account. Black adults, for example, are 25 percentage points more supportive of charter schools than the average local board member.

Read online to view Figure 1: Board members oppose charter schools far more than the public.

Note: For details on the methodology, see the full report.

What explains this gap? Part of the answer may be institutional self-interest. Like unions, school boards likely view charters as competition. Opposition may thus reflect a defensive instinct to protect district enrollments, funding, and influence.

Other factors may relate to race and ideology. Given that board members are, on average, Whiter and more liberal than the communities they represent, skepticism toward charters aligns with broader partisan and demographic patterns in which White liberals are the most hostile demographic to charter expansion. To the extent that boards position themselves as opponents of charter growth, however, they risk not only constraining parental choice but also alienating communities that see charters as a pathway to better opportunities.

Grade inflation

Another critical finding is the stark gap between school board members and the public they serve when it comes to the performance of their own schools.

When asked to grade their own districts, three-quarters of board members award an "A or B." Among the general public, however, only about half grade their own schools so highly. That 25-point gap suggests that those in charge see their schools in far rosier terms than do the parents and citizens on the ground.

Read online to view Figure 2: Board members give their schools higher grades than the public does.

Note: For details on the methodology, see the full report.

How could this be? It may be that board members are simply invested in the system and inclined toward institutional loyalty. Their close working relationships with superintendents, teachers, and administrators may predispose them to interpret data and outcomes in the most favorable light. And their higher levels of education may shape their standards for judgment in ways that differ from those of the broader public.

But whatever the reason, the consequences are significant. If board members consistently overestimate the quality of their districts, they may fail to recognize the urgency of reform in those same districts. They may dismiss parental complaints as outliers rather than indicators of systemic problems. And they may approve policies or budgets that assume widespread satisfaction when in fact many are dissatisfied.

This grade inflation on the part of board members is more than a psychological quirk. It is a governance challenge. It raises the possibility that school boards are insulated from the very feedback loops that democratic accountability is meant to provide. Thus, frustration at the grassroots is fueled by complacency at the top, a combustible combination in an era of heightened political polarization alongside faltering student achievement.

Reconnecting governance to communities

The findings of this bold and comprehensive study—including demographic distinctiveness, opposition to charters, and the mismatch in judging local schools—converge on a common theme: a widening disconnect between school boards and their constituents. As political scientist Vladimir Kogan notes in his recent book, partisan polarization in education has become "top-down [and] elite-driven," which helps explain why boards may be increasingly untethered to community sentiment.

For policymakers and reformers, the message is clear. Efforts to strengthen school performance and results-driven accountability must grapple with the fact that today's boards are not always reliable proxies for community sentiment. Initiatives to expand education choice must anticipate resistance from boards even when demand from families is strong.

If we want America's school boards to actually embody the democratic spirit and come closer to representing the views of the communities they serve, we may need to make them more democratic. That would mean rethinking reforms that may have made sense a century ago but that no longer work very well. For example, perhaps school board elections should shift to November in even-numbered years. Candidates should be a lot more transparent about their views of district performance and what needs to change. State and local ed-reform groups and advocates—and the media—should become far more attentive to who is running, what their agenda is, and where they're coming from.

More politics and transparency might sound like a strange prescription for our polarized and noisy time, but it may just be the cure for a system that has become unrepresentative, unresponsive, and unwilling to embrace change.