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**Fordham Institute October 23 Flypaper article—When school boards act like the PTA—sends another signal that Fordham is aligning with those who propose the elimination of boards of education.**

Public education has been under serious attack back as far as the Reagan administration. First the critics blasted the teachers' unions. Then it was "too many administrators." In 1990 John E. Chub and Terry M. Moe wrote the book, Politics, Markets and America's Schools in the wake of the flawed Nation at Risk report issued by the Reagan Whitehouse. The central message of the book is that "school reform" is obstructed by the board of education governance structure which operates by democratic principles. The gist of the book is that control of education should rely on markets and parental control, rather than the democratic process used by boards of education. Through the  years, some public education critics have issued similar pronouncements.

Fordham seems to be aligning with the anti-board of education plutocrats.

When school boards act like the PTA suggests Fordham is aligning with those who declare that boards of education are a relic of the past. Here is the article:

When school boards act like the PTA

School boards rarely make national news unless someone is shouting. A community member reads a passage from a controversial library book; a teacher's social media post ignites outrage; a member storms out over masks or diversity policies. Skirmishes over culture war issues dominate headlines, giving the impression that the most pressing questions in local education politics are whether the local school board is too conservative or too "woke." The deeper and more consequential problem is far more banal: Too many school boards don't govern. They cheerlead.

A new study from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, *Who's on Board? School Boards and Political Representation in an Age of Conflict*, by David M. Houston and Michael T. Hartney, offers an unvarnished look at the nation's school board members. The findings confirm what I've long suspected (and said, including during my own ill-fated run for school board in my upstate New York town): Local school boards function less like independent oversight bodies and more like glorified parent-teacher associations.

Houston and Hartney surveyed more than 5,000 board members across 3,000 districts. The portrait that emerges is of a group that doesn't always mirror the communities they serve demographically. Nearly nine in ten are white; almost half hold postgraduate degrees; one in four is a current or former teacher. Board members' partisanship and ideology largely mirror the American public's and tend to align with local voters on hot-button cultural issues, the pair found. They're also less supportive of charter schools and teachers unions than their constituents. However (and this, to my mind, is the troublesome bit), school board members give their districts glowing marks. Three-quarters grade their districts an A or B, while the public is much less sanguine.

This is not evidence of corruption or malice. It's something more subtle and insidious: *institutional capture*. The same dynamic that makes regulatory agencies too cozy with the industries they oversee makes school boards too loyal to the districts they're supposed to supervise and hold accountable. Most board elections are low-turnout, off-cycle affairs, dominated by candidates with ties to local education establishments. Once elected, they're socialized into a culture that prizes collegiality and harmony over honest oversight.

As Mike Petrilli and Adam Tyner note in the report's foreword, boards "focus more on facilities and labor issues than on academics." In other words, they devote their energy to maintenance and morale, not to student learning and accountability.

This gap between a school board's power and authority versus what it actually does is the heart of the problem. The board-district relationship need not be adversarial, but it must be independent. A good board should resemble a corporate board of directors: setting vision, ensuring transparency, holding executives accountable, and asking uncomfortable questions. Instead, too many boards act as if their job is to "support" the superintendent and staff—offering encouragement and deference, not impartial oversight.

When I ran for my local board years ago, I made this point and lost. Voters seemed to prefer candidates who promised to "support our teachers" and "work as a team." But there's a difference between working together amicably and being captured by the institution you're meant to steer. It's not that boards are too partisan or ideological. The real divide is professional: boards are dominated by people steeped in education's internal culture, not by independent-minded representatives of the broader community.

The result is a system where even well-intentioned board members measure success by institutional satisfaction rather than student outcomes. They ask whether the superintendent's budget passed smoothly, not whether third graders can read. They grade their districts generously, while families vote with their feet for charters, microschools, and education savings accounts.

For all the attention paid to angry board meetings and "book bans," the more serious and enduring crisis is institutional capture. If the American public school system is to regain trust, it needs boards willing to act less like boosters and more like fiduciaries of the public interest. That starts with designing elections that encourage real competition. Ideas that have been proposed include "on-cycle" contests on Election Day in November, recruiting candidates outside the education establishment, and even making school board elections partisan affairs; adding candidates' political affiliation to the ballot has been shown to increase voter turnout. After the election, it means training board members to understand student learning—not just budgets and buses.

Local control of education doesn't mean uncritical support for the status quo. The job of a school board is to represent citizens, not staff; to serve students, not systems. The culture wars will come and go. The question is whether our local boards will ever learn to govern like boards—and not like PTAs with a bigger budget.

*Editor's note: This was first published by AEI.*