

CONCLUSION

The linchpin of democratic government is the quality of leadership our officials provide. In schooling, this means that our hopes and expectations rest primarily on the boards that govern the nation's almost 14,000 school districts. Historically, however, we haven't paid much attention to who sits on these boards, what they consider important, how they spend their time, how they organize and manage their boards, how their behavior compares to studies of board priorities and actions that positively impact district culture and achievement, or how they get elected to office. This study represents an effort to address precisely those questions. School boards are charged with the critical task of governing our nation's public school systems. This work, as important as it has always been, has taken on renewed urgency amidst changing conditions nationwide.

Two recent trends have converged to make this report even more timely and relevant than it was when the partners first initiated this effort in early 2009. The first is that the fiscal situation facing the nation and our communities has grown even grimmer. What some had hoped would be a summer storm that would shock with its severity but would soon pass now seems increasingly likely to be a sustained autumn downpour. States and districts are likely to be looking at several years of difficult budgets, and the federal government's fiscal travails make it unlikely that any more bailouts will be forthcoming. The second is that the dramatic Republican gains of 2010—in the House of Representatives, state legislatures, and governor's mansions—seem to herald attempts to rein in the federal role. The results seem to ensure that any ESEA reauthorization will be substantially scaled back from No Child Left Behind, and perhaps even from the Obama administration's "ESEA blueprint." It also makes it likely that some federal initiatives, from Race to the Top to School Improvement Grants, are likely to be curtailed or discontinued.

These shifts promise to make the pivotal role of school boards even more significant. If districts are forced to struggle with tough budgets, questions of governance and oversight will become ever more critical. As will efforts to ensure that outlays are being aggressively monitored and that spending is delivering the biggest possible bang for the buck. And if Washington's educational footprint is about to shrink after a decade of outsized impact, the result will mean that improvement efforts will rest even more heavily on local boards. Given these larger shifts and the crucial role of K-12 schooling in assuring the future of our nation and of our youth in the 21st century, the work of school boards has never loomed larger.

Ten years ago, a similar study of the nation's school boards concluded by noting, "No matter what kind of district they serve, today's school board members report that student achievement is a pressing concern."²³ If that was true when No Child Left Behind was enacted, it's even truer today. School districts are buffeted by the pressures of accountability and by demands for consistent achievement. Yet, even as we have been reminded of the importance of strong governance by a series of unfortunate developments in the private sector in recent years—from malfeasance at firms like Tyco and Enron to reckless behavior at financial giants like AIG and Bear Stearns—we have paid remarkably limited attention to the ins and outs of school board governance.

School boards and the superintendents they hire may view their priorities through slightly different lenses, but these perspectives play a complementary role in district leadership. Boards are slightly more focused on workforce and college preparation than their superintendents, though both groups prioritize preparing students for satisfying and productive lives and are more concerned about some of the excesses of accountability and the need to support teachers and school leaders. When it comes to board member attitudes, however, as well as everything from board staffing to elections, there are substantial variations across communities.

Put simply, all school boards are not the same. While various reformers, including Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, have championed governance reform, we have seen in the preceding pages that the conditions and nature of board governance vary dramatically across the nation's districts. Such an observation may suggest that the response to the challenges is likely to vary as well.

For those who have championed mayoral control of schools in cities like Washington, D.C., and New York City, and for those who have challenged the wisdom of such measures, a better understanding of the gritty reality of district governance and the thinking of board members would seem essential. For state and federal policymakers counting on districts to translate into practice new policies governing accountability, standards, or school restructuring, an appreciation for the strengths and limitations of local boards would seem imperative. For advocates calling on district leaders to make difficult budget decisions and to rethink the use of staff and technology, the attitudes and expectations of board members loom large. It is time for those board members to receive the informed, thoughtful consideration that their critical role deserves.