



MUNICIPAL LEAGUE FOUNDATION

SCHOOL BOARD GOVERNANCE IN KING COUNTY: UNDERSTANDING BOARD ROLE AND EFFECTIVENESS IN IMPROVING K-12 EDUCATION

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	i
Introduction & Background	1
Purpose and Study Approach	
Study Questions	
Characteristics of Effective School Boards	
School Board Governance Models	
Contentious Contexts	6
Overview of Nineteen King County School Districts	7
Overview, Demographics, and Performance	
Findings and Recommendations	10
Themes, Findings and Recommendations	
Conclusion	19
Attachments	
A. King County School District Data	20
B. Summary of Survey Responses	28
C. List of Committee Members	31
D. List of Stakeholders Interviewed	32
E. References and Selected Readings	33

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

King County's 19 school districts range from urban, to suburban, to rural, and from a size of over 50,000 students in Seattle to just 42 students in Skykomish. The Municipal League Foundation's Education Committee wanted to understand the characteristics and the challenges facing school districts countywide, and to determine what locally elected school boards can do to make themselves and their districts more effective. We wanted to assess how and to what extent districts have successfully overcome challenges they faced, and what board practices may lead to above-average student achievement. The goals for the report are to encourage a culture of self-examination and continuous learning on school boards, and to stimulate a community dialogue about effective school governance that is based on the report's findings and recommendations.

Our study is based on an online survey, interviews, a review of national research on effective school governance, an examination of data on district demographics, spending and student achievement, and on a citizen-based process of exploration and debate. We did not examine practices in individual districts or attempt to identify specific policies or tools that could be generalized to all districts.

WHAT SCHOOL BOARDS DO

School boards, directly or indirectly, shape the conditions under which educators work and the ways in which families experience public education. What school boards do is just as important as what they do not do. In Washington State, school boards are expected to:

- Hire, evaluate, and/or fire the superintendent;
- Determine how resources will be distributed, subject to state and federal requirements;
- Provide oversight for the use and maintenance of district facilities;
- Determine how families will enroll and access different educational experiences;
- Adopt instructional materials that determine what is taught by teachers;
- Establish policies related to the hiring, firing and professional development of staff.

Boards delegate many of these functions to administrators, but they remain fundamentally accountable to voters and to their communities to see these core tasks fulfilled. Boards do not oversee or evaluate teachers or school administration.

DETERMINING WHAT MAKES AN EFFECTIVE BOARD

While people may disagree about what makes an effective school board, the Municipal League Committee defined effectiveness in terms of outcomes for students. The relationship between a given board's policies and practices and student learning is complex, and generally indirect. Nevertheless, because school boards are directly responsible for setting policy, we believe that their effectiveness must be measured in terms of their effects on students.

Districts have unique attributes that make generalizations difficult, and there are many factors school boards do not control. However, we found that constraints facing school boards are not insurmountable, and we identified districts that display positive statistics, given their student populations and the amount of overall funding with which they had to work.

In this report, we discuss data that highlight some districts as demonstrating good success in their graduation rates and in reducing the achievement gap, even with high poverty and ethnic diversity,



and just average per-pupil spending for King County. We identify other districts with generally affluent student populations and good overall student performance but troubling achievement gaps when comparing the scores of all students to those of low income and minority students. We do not attribute such outcomes directly to things that school boards are doing, but we point them out to highlight what we believe school boards should be paying attention to.

In studying what makes an effective school board, the Committee learned from national research that there is broad agreement on many of the characteristics that must be present: developing a clear vision and goals for student learning; working as a team in collaboration between board members, superintendent, and district staff; using data and accountability to focus on meeting established goals; engaging the community and being responsive to the community culture; and aligning authority, responsibility and resources to focus on the district goals.

These broad principles in turn lead to a profile of a well-qualified board candidate or sitting board member. Among other characteristics, an effective board member should have:

- Willingness to work collaboratively toward a common vision;
- Understanding of board role and responsibilities;
- Ability to delegate management and operational matters to staff;
- Capacity and skill to engage with diverse communities;
- Emotional strength, strong listening skills, and acceptance of conflict;
- Ability to devote substantial time to the role.

Our study focused on identifying the challenges to board effectiveness in King County.

CHALLENGES TO BOARD EFFECTIVENESS

Many school boards suffer from common challenges that hamper their ability to focus on key goals and work together with district staff as a cohesive governance and management team.

The most widespread challenges we identified include:

- Board member inexperience, particularly in large districts with budgets in the hundreds of millions, and unprecedented complexity;
- Inability to commit the often 15 hours or more per week board business may require;
- Lack of routine opportunities to address communication and relationship issues;
- Little understanding of or training on what school board governance is and the appropriate role of the board member;
- Frequent board and superintendent turnover and lack of continuity of plans;
- Single-issue board members who are passionate about one issue or a point of view and prove unable to work toward the broad mission and goals of the district;
- Limited exposure to data, and how to use it for decision-making.

SEVEN WAYS TO IMPROVE SCHOOL BOARDS

Based on these broad themes, the Committee developed the following findings and recommendations to help school boards govern more effectively: Professional development and “onboarding” for school boards is inadequate.

FINDING 1

Professional development and “onboarding” for school boards is inadequate.

Recommendation 1a: School districts should provide a formalized orientation for new school board members with a comprehensive briefing and materials that include data on school district demographics and student achievement, finances and budget, major issues and upcoming policy decisions, and local school board culture and norms.

Recommendation 1b: School districts should provide ongoing training and professional development for board members. Training should address, on the one hand, soft skills relating to communication, relationships, constituent and public relations, and governance practices, and, on the other, hard knowledge of district systems and operations, finances, strategic plan goals, and school-based operations and issues such as teaching, grading, evaluation, discipline, extracurricular activities, and other local issues of significance.

Recommendation 1c: School districts should provide time for exploration and board discussion on the various issues facing the board and the education system. These work sessions could focus on testing, discipline, trends, evaluation, curriculum, or any other areas the board may need more knowledge on at a given time. Provide time for these sessions outside of regularly scheduled board meetings.

FINDING 2

There is little understanding of the skills required to be a quality board member, or of how to attract such candidates to service on a school board.

Recommendation 2a: Individuals thinking of running for school board are urged to take a course or seminar, perhaps offered by the Washington School Directors Association (WSSDA) or another organization, to gauge their fit with the role and to prepare themselves for skills they’ll need and issues they will confront on the job.

Recommendation 2b: State policymakers should consider passage of legislation authorizing larger districts to compensate board members for their service.

FINDING 3

Not all school districts in King County have developed clear, focused strategic plans with measurable objectives. Some plans are vague and aspirational, and fail to articulate a strategic direction for the superintendent to implement. Some districts have failed to adequately leverage their plans to gain community buy-in.

Recommendation 3a: All King County school districts should be using strategic plans to focus and unify their governance and management around a few key goals for student learning. Plans should be built around a small number of measurable objectives, not simply vague aspirational goals. These plans should be developed with broad community input and awareness, and should be used by the community to monitor and evaluate the district’s performance.

Recommendation 3b: The Municipal League intends to emphasize the role of a strategic plan in its school board candidate rating process. Discussion of district strategic planning and goals should become part of the public election process for school board office.

FINDING
4

Board and superintendent continuity is essential to implement strategic goals, which often require three to five years of sustained attention.

Recommendation 4: Districts should make efforts to improve the public understanding of what an effective board-superintendent relationship looks like to improve the relationship and reduce turnover. School boards need to be transparent when hiring a superintendent on what type of relationship they expect.

FINDING
5

School boards need formalized mechanisms for data reporting and sharing so that they can be well-informed on their district's performance and can exercise their oversight role.

Recommendation 5a: Boards should establish and follow procedures for making data and information requests of staff. These might include requirements that requests be supported by a majority of board members, to discourage requests that are based on the personal interests of board members.

Recommendation 5b: Boards should develop a process to determine what data the superintendent and staff will produce to meet strategic planning needs and to reduce the number of requests for additional data.

FINDING
6

School boards need ways to build civic capital and trust among their members, with management, and with their communities to avoid excessive conflict or factionalism.

Recommendation 6a: To limit excessive ideological factionalism and focus on single issues, school board members should agree to practice good governance as described in this report. School boards should consider asking themselves to adopt an agreement similar to the following: We will be dedicated to effective and responsive school board governance to promote the vision and mission of this school district. We will collaborate with each other to promote those policies and practices that will help achieve our common goals.

Recommendation 6b: Boards should develop consensus among sitting board members about the appropriate roles, responsibilities, and communication strategies of the board. Ensure that this vision is passed along as turnover occurs on the board.

Recommendation 6c: Districts should schedule more time for boards to get to know fellow board members in settings other than formal board meetings. Study sessions, retreats, and social events, not just for new members, create opportunities to exchange ideas and develop relationships.

FINDING
7

School boards need to develop a proactive strategy for ongoing public communication, outreach and community engagement. In some districts community outreach seems to be not effectively organized, and the attention tends to go to the “squeaky wheels” rather than broadly to the full range of constituencies.

Recommendation 7a: School districts should task a specific person dedicated to supporting school board members with identifying and scheduling outreach opportunities, school related events, speaking engagements, and meetings with a range of community groups. A coordinated proactive plan can ensure that a wide range of community stakeholders is reached and that board members' time is used strategically given their availability.

Recommendation 7b: School districts should designate a Constituent Ombudsperson position to serve as the portal for parent and community issues about the district. The ombudsperson would ensure that all requests are addressed by the appropriate district personnel, and the inquirer is responded to in a timely manner.

INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND AND METHODS

The Municipal League has been studying and monitoring local government for more than 100 years. Over the years, we have looked into issues such as government corruption, regional infrastructure, land use, transportation, civil rights, and education. We have typically employed the model of smart, engaged citizens and civic leaders studying issues and drawing attention to how government can do better. In September 2014 we convened a committee of citizens to review school board governance in King County school districts. Our Committee members came from many walks of life and professional backgrounds, including educators, lawyers, researchers, labor, parents, and former elected officials, and all shared a passion for delving into the business of how schools are governed.

As part of our project, we conducted an online survey of the school board directors and superintendents in the 19 school districts in King County; we conducted in-person and telephone interviews with 30 individual school board members, school staff, and community stakeholders in five districts (Federal Way, Highline, Kent, Lake Washington and Seattle)¹; we compiled and analyzed spending and performance data from the Washington State Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction and the Washington State School Directors Association; we reviewed the academic research on school governance and heard from national experts during the course of our study.

It is important to note what we did not do: We did not examine practices in individual districts, and we did not attempt to identify specific policies or tools that could be generalized to all districts. Throughout this study, the Committee members were very aware of how different each district is, and how varied the demographics and community factors are to which each district must respond.

The Committee found many admirable characteristics in the voluntary, citizen-based school boards that are the hallmark of our American system of school governance. We also found some areas in need of improvement and rethinking. Unlike many groups in the education arena today, we began our work without preconceived positions or ideas about what is working or not working in education. While our committee members certainly brought their individual experiences and backgrounds to the group, we came to our conclusions through a process of study, questioning, dialogue, and consensus.

We offer our findings and recommendations in the hope that the 19 school districts in King County will embrace this opportunity to hear from an engaged civic organization and an independent group of civic-minded individuals. One goal we have for the report is to encourage a culture of self-examination and continuous learning on school boards. Another goal is to stimulate a community dialogue about the school boards we elect and what makes them effective.

School boards today operate in a most challenging environment. The globalizing economy, the knowledge-based nature of today's jobs, funding constraints, declining confidence in government and institutions, increasing awareness and concern about social equity and the continuing achievement gap between children of wealth and poverty—all of these factors create the context in which we issue this report. We urge that the findings and recommendations of this report be taken as a pressing call to review some policies and management practices in our school districts today.

STUDY QUESTIONS

The Municipal League's candidate evaluation program has for many years used four criteria to rate candidates running for public office, including school board candidates: knowledge, character, involvement, and effectiveness. Our organizational mission is to work toward having high-caliber public officials making good policy decisions for the citizens of King County. In general we are fortunate to have mostly clean and effective governance in our local municipalities and state government in Washington. Some King County school districts and their boards are considered highly effective and in fact have been recognized as boards of distinction.

In setting itself the task of delving into school board governance, the Municipal League posed a number of questions for study. Are our four criteria still useful? What makes an effective school board?

¹ Names of individuals interviewed can be found in Attachment D. School board members in several districts declined our requests for interviews.

What makes an effective school board member? Why are some school boards known as “rubber stamp” boards or as “dysfunctional” boards or as “micro-managing” boards? What practices can overcome such behaviors? Our study group set out to consider these questions as part of a year-long process.



WHAT IS AN EFFECTIVE SCHOOL BOARD?

School boards are agents of the state that are charged with overseeing the operation of local school districts. Most of the laws related to the school board governance in Washington can be found in RCW chapter 28A. Boards receive and administer all federal, state, and local funds for K-12 education. While boards are constrained by state and federal laws and regulations, they also have broad discretionary powers to “adopt policies that promote the education...of K-12 students” and “the effective, efficient or safe management and operation of the school district.”²

School boards, directly or indirectly, shape the conditions under which educators work and the ways in which families experience public education. School boards hire, evaluate and/or fire the superintendent, determine how resources will be distributed, provide oversight for the use and maintenance of district facilities, determine how families will enroll and access different educational experiences, adopt instructional materials that determine what is taught by teachers, and establish policies related to the hiring, firing and professional development of staff. Boards delegate many of these functions to administrators, however, they remain responsible to the educational community and their constituents.

While people may disagree about what makes a school board effective, our committee defined effectiveness in terms of impacts on student learning. The relationship between a given board’s policies and practices and student learning is complex and generally indirect. Nevertheless, because school boards are directly responsible for setting policy for local school systems, we believe that their effectiveness must be measured at least in part in terms of their impacts on students. We do not attribute any particular district’s student outcomes directly to things that its school board may or may not be doing, but we point them out to highlight what we believe school boards should be paying attention to.

² <http://www.wssda.org/Portals/0/Resources/Publications/soylsbman.pdf>

Our Committee drew upon existing research to understand characteristics of effective school boards. According to the National School Board Association, effective school boards:³

- Commit to a vision of high expectations for student achievement and quality instruction, and define clear goals towards that vision;
- Share beliefs and values about what is possible for students and their ability to learn, and of the system and its ability to teach all children at high levels;
- Are accountability driven, spending less time on operational issues and more time focused on policies to improve student achievement;
- Collaborate with staff and the community to establish district goals and develop plans to meet those goals;
- Embrace and monitor data, even when the information is negative, and use it to drive continuous improvement;
- Align and sustain resources to meet district goals;
- Lead as a united team with the superintendent, each from their respective roles, with strong collaboration and mutual trust;
- Take part in team development and training to build shared knowledge, values, and commitments for their improvement efforts.

SCHOOL BOARD GOVERNANCE MODELS

A variety of governance models and approaches seek to improve the effectiveness of school boards through structural changes, through prescriptions for board-superintendent roles, through communication practices, or through other means intended to get at the underlying weaknesses thought to exist in the American approach of locally elected boards.

Our Committee heard from proponents of several of these approaches to improving board effectiveness but did not set out to evaluate them or their applicability in the King County context. We provide a brief overview of four widely considered models here for background and context. After our review of the literature on school board governance, we felt that no single model has been shown conclusively to be superior to others, and that as citizen volunteers, we would not have the capacity to pick one model over others. We did, however, make broad observations about the advantages and benefits of several of these theoretical models and their application, and we drew concepts and practices from them in our recommendations.

Although we do not recommend a specific governance model, one of the features that the models share is the definition of the roles of school board members and staff. As detailed in the recommendations section of this report, we believe it is important for school boards and school district staff to take the time to clarify the roles and responsibilities of school board members.

Some governance models try to improve school board effectiveness by changing the formal structures in which they operate. Here are the four most common governance models advocated for use today:

Appointment of school board members by a mayor, governor or other entity (also known as “mayoral control”)

This model puts a party other than voters in charge of appointing some or all board members, typically in larger urban school districts. The approach is intended to overcome such weaknesses as ill-prepared school board members, single-issue members, factionalism and politicization on boards, and boards that do not agree on policy-setting vs. management roles.

Proponents of appointed boards argue that this approach can improve effectiveness by centralizing responsibility for schools, broadening the constituencies involved in policy-making, reducing micro-

³ <http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Public-education/Eight-characteristics-of-effective-school-boards>

management and board-superintendent turnover, and better connecting schools with other city services for children and youth.

Mayoral appointment of school board members has been attempted in a number of large cities, including New York, Baltimore, and Chicago. The Committee did not study this method in depth, but our reading led us to the conclusion that this method has had mixed success and often results, in the long term, in the same weaknesses and factionalism that sometimes exist in our current method of choosing board members. **The political aspect of being a board member is not removed.** Rather it is relocated from the voters to the office of the appointing authority. In Seattle, there have been calls for mayoral appointment of school board members, but the Municipal League did not see evidence that this approach has been clearly successful elsewhere and is not taking a position on it in this report.

Constitutional Governance

Constitutional governance is proposed in Paul Hill and Ashley Jochim's 2014 book, *A Democratic Constitution for Public Education*. It gets local boards out of the business of managing schools directly. It devolves most district functions (including hiring staff, choosing instructional materials, etc.) to school management, who operate autonomously from the board via contracts and memoranda of understanding.

In speaking to our Committee, Paul Hill drew a parallel to the U.S. Constitution and its framework of federal and state powers and responsibilities. Under this decentralized approach of limited government, school boards set performance standards but delegate to school principals all management responsibility to run their schools. Schools can compete for the best teachers and open up to innovation in response to their local needs. Board effectiveness is improved by focusing attention on a very limited set of activities – sponsoring new schools for children and neighborhoods that need them, and closing schools where children are not learning.

Other governance models try to improve school board effectiveness by changing board practice, through training and professional support provided to board members.

Policy Governance

This model grew out of corporate and non-profit board work. It is closely associated with the writing and advocacy of John Carver, who believes policy governance can improve the performance of elected school boards. The role of the board is tightly constrained to setting goals for the organization and monitoring progress toward those goals on a regular schedule.

The policy governance board eschews any role or intervention in management's strategies for improving or achieving outcomes. It has been used successfully in Lake Washington School District for many years and is used in districts scattered throughout the country. In King County, policy governance is also used more or less explicitly in Issaquah, Mercer Island, and Federal Way school districts, as well as in non-profit organizations such as Puget Consumers Coop, Food Lifeline, and 501 Commons.

This model provides clarity and continuity of roles and objectives, and reduces the workload of volunteer board members. The primary duty of the board is to determine the policy direction and goals of the organization, and to delegate to management the means to accomplish those goals. The board provides oversight and monitoring, and linkage to community stakeholders.

The clear advantage of this model is that it creates space at board meetings for deeper discussions of values, strategy and policy, and reduces the time spent on operational matters and transactional details. It is unclear whether it is suitable to highly complex or stratified urban communities where board interests are many and demand for change and addressing of a persistent achievement gap is strong.

Balanced Governance

This is a newer model built directly from research on school boards throughout the United States. Its leading proponent is Professor Tom Alsbury of Seattle Pacific University School of Education. As its name implies, the balanced governance model attempts to create a balanced role for school boards that fulfills the policy making role, as well as oversight of management, and provides a conduit for community concerns and emergent issues.

The balance lies between a disengaged “rubber stamp” board and an unbounded, micro-managing board. Balanced governance seeks to leverage the full potential of board and management by working on cultural responsiveness, systems level thinking, and innovation and creativity, as well as the traditional roles of fiscal and policymaking to move public education forward.

Balanced governance is less a political theory, and more a distillation of the characteristics of successful (defined as improving student achievement) school boards in the United States. It requires board members to be willing to improve their performance, work as a team and be deliberative. It recognizes that board members are both trustees of the whole community and delegates of specific groups or causes. While the trustee role must dominate in the long run, there is room for the delegate or advocate role as well.

The advantages of the balanced governance approach can be seen as flexibility rather than prescriptiveness, recognition of existing interest group pressures and roles in an elected school board system, and reliance on board-management trust and collaboration rather than set role definitions.



THE CONTENTIOUS CONTEXTS IN WHICH SCHOOL BOARDS OPERATE

LEGISLATIVE BATTLES

The past five years have been a period of resource scarcity, tight budgets, growing class sizes and labor discontent in Washington State. The State Legislature has underfunded K-12 education (determined in the State Supreme Court's *McCleary* decision⁴) as well as rescinded initiatives that provided cost of living salary increases to teachers, and reduced class sizes. Simultaneously, state and federal governments were raising expectations for student performance and teacher accountability, triggering an intense local debate about how to “reform” public education. This is the context within which King County school boards have operated in recent years.

SCHOOL-BASED OBSTACLES

It has been difficult, both fiscally and ideologically, to launch major new programs or initiatives. Staff morale has been challenged by the public discourse over teacher competency, low pay (compared to that of peer states), large class sizes (the bottom quintile nationally), and a yearly array of unfunded mandates from state and federal government.

ENDLESS SOLUTIONS TO PERSISTENT PROBLEMS

Overlaying this governing environment is the historic challenge of addressing the achievement or opportunity gap between the performance of affluent versus poor students, white and some Asian nationalities versus Black, Latino and Native American. Nationally, a debate has simmered for years now over how best to address the student achievement gap.

Advocates of various reform theories and experiments have promoted charter schools, decentralized approaches to hiring principals and running schools, small high schools, standardized curricula and testing, teacher accountability schemes, emphasis on science and technology education, and many other ideas. Teachers' unions and some education stakeholders have tended to argue in favor of early learning interventions, smaller class sizes, professional development, and better funding for schools. Controversies have erupted around individual organizations and programs.

POLARIZED POINTS OF VIEW

The various perspectives and stakeholders in these public debates have become strongly polarized and mistrustful of each other. School board members and educators as well as citizens and community groups have sometimes taken sides in these debates, leading to entrenched positions, lack of respect, and difficulty working together productively. In Seattle in particular, but by no means exclusively, the polarized points of view have sometimes made it difficult to engage in open civic discourse about policy choices and school board elections. The Municipal League hopes that this report can stimulate conversations and bring people of varied opinions to a common table.

⁴ *McCleary, et ux., et al. v. State of Washington*, 173 Wn.2d 477, 260 P.3d 277 (2012).

OVERVIEW OF NINETEEN KING COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICTS

King County's school districts range from urban, to suburban, to rural, and from a size of over 50,000 students in Seattle to just 42 students in Skykomish. The Municipal League's Education Committee wanted to understand the characteristics and the challenges facing school districts countywide, and to help us select a smaller number of districts on which to focus our efforts. The data presented here are for background and context, not to draw correlations between individual school boards and the data about a district's students. For example, no inference is intended between a specific district with high or low student achievement and the effectiveness of its school board.

We gathered data on district demographics, spending, student achievement, and board turnover. (See Attachment A, Tables 1 to 5.) We found that districts have unique attributes that make generalizations very difficult.

The Committee's next step was to compile data through an on-line survey, in-person interviews, and other analytic efforts.

The Committee chose to focus its interviews and analytic efforts on those districts with large student populations, high free and reduced lunch rates, and those with interesting board profiles. Tables in Attachment A show data for the 2013-14 school year, sorted by district size, percent of free and reduced lunch students (a proxy for low income families), spending per pupil, four-year graduation rate, and reading and math achievement by ethnic group. On a broad overview level, we were able to make the following observations:

ON SIZE

- The largest districts are Seattle with over 50,000 students, Kent with 28,000 students, and Lake Washington with 26,000 students. Seattle is a single-city, predominantly urban district, whereas the Kent and Lake Washington districts each span multiple municipalities in largely suburban areas.

ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE

- The districts with the highest percent of free and reduced lunch are Tukwila with 79% and Highline with 69%. Federal Way, Auburn, Renton, and Kent also have large percentages of students from low income families.
- Mercer Island, Issaquah, and Snoqualmie Valley districts in East King County have the fewest students from low income families.
- Seattle, which has a wide socio-economic distribution, has about 40% of its students on free and reduced lunch, falling near the middle of the range among King County districts.



1 Shoreline 2 Northshore 3 Seattle
4 Lake Washington 5 Riverview
6 Skykomish 7 Snoqualmie Valley 8 Bellevue
9 Mercer Island 10 Issaquah 11 Vashon Island 12 Highline
13 Tukwila 14 Renton 15 Tahoma 16 Kent 17 Federal Way
18 Auburn 19 Enumclaw

ON ETHNIC PROFILE

- Among the largest districts, Seattle is 55% minority, Kent is 62% minority, and Lake Washington is 39% minority.
- The districts with the smallest proportions of non-white students are the rural East King County districts of Skykomish, Snoqualmie Valley, and Riverview.
- The largest minority student populations can be found in Tukwila and Highline.



ON OVERALL STUDENT PERFORMANCE - GRADUATION RATES

- Mercer Island, Issaquah, Northshore, Bellevue, and Lake Washington districts have the highest four-year graduation rates.
- Tukwila and Highline, with the highest poverty levels, also had the lowest graduation rates at 57% and 62%.
- Northshore school district, with a free and reduced lunch population of 17% still achieved a graduation rate of nearly 90%.
- Seattle and Kent, districts with 40% and 52% poverty rates, respectively, had graduation rates obverse to their free and reduced lunch proportions, namely a graduation rate of 73% in Seattle and 79% in Kent. Seattle's graduation rate is very similar to Federal Way's, but Federal Way has 20% more free and reduced lunch students.



ON STUDENT PERFORMANCE BY SUBGROUP—ACHIEVEMENT GAP

- Every district in King County has an achievement gap between all of its students and its low income students, as well its children of color and white children, in reading in 3rd grade and math in 7th grade.
- The gap ranges between 8% and 40% in different districts, for all children compared to low income children. In Tukwila the 3rd grade reading gap is just 4%, in Lake Washington it is 22%. The largest reading gap is in Riverview at 31%.
- The 7th grade math gap between students with free and reduced lunch and all other students is 4% in Tukwila. Issaquah has the largest math gap with 33%.
- We noted unusually strong disparities in several districts with few low income students, where white students were performing at standard in 3rd grade reading around 90% of the time, but children of color performed at a much lower rate.
- The largest achievement gaps between black and white students in 3rd grade reading are in Tukwila and Seattle.

The Committee found these inequities troubling. We wondered whether factors such as district spending per pupil might help explain why some districts were falling short of expectations in regard to student outcomes. We looked at both actual instructional dollars spent per pupil and percent of spending that went to instruction (rather than non-instructional services such as transportation, facilities or administration).

SPENDING PER PUPIL

- Seattle had the highest instructional spending per pupil at \$9,733 (not including outlier Skykomish). Seattle Public Schools has a diverse student population and relatively high proportions of students from lower socio-economic levels, factors which tend to drive formula-based revenues. The higher per-pupil spending did not appear to lead to better outcomes for students.
- Renton, with spending of \$8,071 per pupil, and a poverty rate of 54%, achieved a graduation rate of 74%. Similarly, Kent, with spending of \$8,117 and a poverty rate of 52%, achieved a graduation of 79%. Auburn spent \$8,267 per pupil, had a 54% poverty rate, and also graduated 75% of its students in four years.

BOARD TURNOVER

The Committee wondered whether there might be a relationship between school board stability and district outcomes. As noted elsewhere in this report, we learned that it takes a good five years to implement broad goals to affect student learning, and continuity of board vision is essential. We obtained data from WSSDA on the percent of board turnover during the period 2000 to 2014.

- The greatest stability during this period was at Tahoma (just 21% turnover in 14 years), Auburn and Lake Washington (36% turnover), and Renton (43%). All of these districts have relatively strong reputations as effective systems with better than average outcomes given their demographic make-up.
- The highest board turnovers at 129% were in Seattle and Federal Way. In recent years, both of these school boards have experienced an unusually high degree of turmoil, as well as board member and community dissatisfaction with the direction and performance of the district. Both districts now have new superintendents and a renewed sense on the boards of working together to achieve a common vision.

Clearly, the wealthier the district, the higher the student performance. This is a relationship that has been well-documented nationwide for many years. This fact generally holds true in King County, with Mercer Island, Issaquah, Northshore, Bellevue and Lake Washington districts having the highest four-year graduation rates, and Tukwila and Highline having the lowest. And yet, some variation within King County reveals that some school districts are making more progress in closing the achievement gap and improving outcomes for all students.

Many school district characteristics are outside the control of the school board, among them district size, district geography, student ethnic and socio-economic profiles, the property tax base, and the revenue formulas that determine district spending. However, we believe that a school board can and should make efforts to overcome these challenges and improve outcomes for students, regardless of the hand it is dealt.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the Committee's survey and interviews in various districts in King County, and from our analysis of available data about the districts, our group was able to assemble a picture of variations in size, budget, ethnic and economic diversity, spending, and performance. Given the wide range of circumstances each district faces, we found it difficult to generalize about district and school board functioning. However, we did find common themes that emerged repeatedly.

Some school boards are stable and experience continuity over time. They have buy-in from their communities about a common mission, and high levels of trust and communication with district staff. A common theme identified in our survey, however, of even the most successful boards is the feeling of being hamstrung by inadequate funding and a myriad of state and federal mandates and regulations. Board members often told us they feel there are too many factors outside their control.

We also heard that some boards experience challenges that can make it difficult to function effectively. They experience:

- Lack of understanding of district processes, norms, and history
- Complexity of issues and community needs
- Inadequate or unproductive communication with district staff and superintendent
- Lack of understanding of data on major trends
- Frequent turnover of board members and senior management

For a school board, tackling each of these areas requires different sets of skills and knowledge. As one superintendent put it, new board members have a hard time understanding the barrage of information that starts coming to them once they get elected. In many districts there is insufficient structure in place for new board members. School board members are given little introduction to the norms, culture, and practices of their board and district. There is often little guidance on the major issues and challenges facing the district, and little awareness of the data and background information that would allow proper analysis of these issues.

Here are some of the most persistent challenges faced by many boards:

Inexperience. Large districts have budgets in the hundreds of millions of dollars. Many board members get elected with no experience working in organizations of this size and complexity. Other board members may arrive with no background in education policy or school systems management. Yet board members make decisions that affect students, teachers, and many other kinds of school employees without firsthand knowledge of working in a school system.

Not enough time. Board members are often elected or appointed on one date, and are seated on the dais at their first board meeting immediately or within weeks. The orientation to their new role may be cursory at best. Training to learn about major issues affecting the district may come over time with limited opportunity to engage in questioning and discussion with staff or more experienced board members. In larger districts over 60% of board members say they spend more than 15 hours per week on board business. One board member said she was overwhelmed with how much work it takes to research an issue deeply enough to ask tough questions of district staff—the kinds of questions a person needs to ask before making an important policy decision.

Communication and relationships. Board members told the Committee that there is often no functional forum to address communication and relationship issues among members of the board, and between the board and district staff. Board members often meet only in formal settings where candid discussion of issues is difficult. The Committee heard that building trust is vital, because the board and staff need to be unified when acting on behalf of the students and the community. Extensive time working together, as well as trainings on how to work as a team, are needed to build the relationships and the trust to work together effectively.

Inadequate understanding of school board governance. Board members in some districts may have little understanding or training on school board governance and the appropriate role of the board. The high-level duties of a board are easy enough to state—approve budgets, hire a superintendent, and develop policies. But many situations fall into gray areas and board members need to avoid entering into a managerial role. The boundaries of what board members do, what makes an effective board member, and how to interact with staff and constituents are crucial elements of governance that may not be explicitly addressed. Some districts have well-defined norms and an adopted governance model that certainly helps with this challenge. Others do not.

Board meetings: an artificial setting. Much of the public meeting time is spent on transactional business and engaging with presenters from the district and the community. By their public nature, board meetings tend to showcase a more reserved form of interaction among the board members rather than an open exploration or discussion of a complex issue. Several interviewees identified the Open Public Meetings Act as a hindrance to board development. Board members may be reluctant to reveal ignorance by asking questions, and may not always know what they believe about a new or complex issue.

Turnover and continuity of plans for board and superintendent. From data we obtained from WSSDA, the Committee learned that some districts experience much higher board turnover than others. In particular Seattle and Federal Way have each had 129% board turnover since the year 2000, compared to that of other districts that have had fewer than half of their board members turn over. Sometimes Board members find the time commitment unsustainable, especially if they have a full-time job and family obligations. Other times school board members may become disillusioned by the amount of stress involved in frequent citizen demands to help resolve issues with their child or their school; or they may become burnt out by long meetings, hostile attacks, or conflicts in their district.

The Committee heard that implementing any broad strategy and goals takes focus and continuity over five years or longer. Yet some board members reported a lack of connection with superintendents who were hired by previous boards. A similar lack of familiarity with plans and processes put in place by previous regimes was reported as sometimes leading to strategic plans that atrophy and are not carried through. This is not always a deliberate choice so much as a simple lack of understanding of why certain decisions were made, and what goals were put in place that require monitoring and follow-through.

Single-issue board members. Often, new members run for school board because they are passionate about a single issue or a point of view such as testing or curriculum or education reform. This passion may make an excellent candidate and should be considered a strength, but once on the board, members will face an array of issues other than the ones that motivated them to run for their position. Thus, new policy decisions can end up becoming political wedge issues, or they may end up being decided by members who are not well-informed about the issue. In a worst-case situation, factions may form that are unrelated to the broad mission and goals of the district, and may exacerbate communication and trust issues.

Data reporting and synthesis. Many board members have limited exposure to budgets, financial reports, and demographic and performance data, and thus struggle to use them for decision-making. The Committee heard from some districts that their boards hold quarterly or semi-annual study sessions or retreats for briefings on data and discussions of major policy issues. However, exposing board members to large amounts of data in one session can be overwhelming and even the synthesis of that data can be difficult to translate into policy decisions.

Based on these broad themes, the Committee developed the following findings and recommendations to help school boards govern more effectively:



Professional development and “onboarding” for school boards is inadequate.

Training materials for school board candidates and new members are offered online at the Washington State School Directors Association website (www.wssda.org). These materials are generic and require individuals to be motivated to read numerous

documents for themselves. One Seattle interviewee stated, “The training provided by WSSDA is like a bike with training wheels and doesn’t serve larger urban or metropolitan districts well.”

New member training and ongoing professional development in individual districts seems to be a hit or miss affair. New members are sometimes given insufficient background into their duties, the history of the school board and school district they are serving, its major policy challenges, the financials of the district, and the location of additional resources. Some districts do have processes in place to initiate new members, both in basic information about the district, and in softer skills that will be required in dealing with the personalities, politics, and issues that they will be facing. But newly elected members are nevertheless often unprepared for the large array of issues that confront them soon after taking office.

Even with a well-prepared local onboarding process, new school board members are faced with a steep learning curve and little foundation. One interviewee suggested several ways in which the onboarding process could be improved:

“Simplify content and support ease of sharing of salient information; offer board members strong training in policies and current district initiatives and goals; and provide training on the contexts in which we embark on developing and changing policy.”

The Committee heard these sentiments multiple times among the members, staff, and community stakeholders we interviewed and surveyed. The only way to address this issue is to acknowledge it and dedicate the necessary resources to ensure that school board members are put in a position to succeed.

Recommendation 1a: School districts should provide a formalized orientation for new school board members with a comprehensive briefing and materials that include data on school district demographics and student achievement, finances and budget, major issues and upcoming policy decisions, and local school board culture and norms.

Recommendation 1b: School districts should provide ongoing training and professional development for board members. Training should address, on the one hand, soft skills relating to communication, relationships, constituent and public relations, and governance theory and practices. On the other hand, they need to know the hard facts on district systems and operations, finances, strategic plan goals, and school-based operations and issues such as teaching, grading, evaluation, discipline, extracurricular activities, and other local issues of significance.

Recommendation 1c: School districts should provide time for issue exploration and board discussion on the various issues facing the board and the educational system. These work sessions could focus on testing, discipline, trends, evaluation, curriculum, or any other areas the board may need more knowledge on at a given time. Provide time for these sessions outside of regularly scheduled board meetings.



There is little understanding generally of what skills make quality board members and how to attract them to service on a school board.

School boards in some districts have difficulty attracting and retaining well-qualified members. Some districts experience frequent turnover on their board (and consequently among superintendents or senior staff). Such leadership discontinuity may result in shifts in vision, goals or policy from year to year, frustrating school staff, parents and communities, and making it difficult to carry through a needed strategy. Our survey responses told us that many school board members in larger districts are spending more than 15 hours a week on board business, yet do not feel well-informed on complex decisions they must make.

What makes a quality board member? In studying what makes an effective school board, the Committee learned from the national research that there is broad agreement on some of the characteristics that must be present: developing a clear vision and goals for student learning; working as a team in collaboration with board members and district staff; using data and accountability to

focus on meeting the established goals; engaging the community and responding to the community culture; and aligning authority, responsibility and resources to focus on the district goals.

These broad principles in turn lead to a profile of a well-qualified board candidate or sitting board member:

- Willingness to work collaboratively toward a common vision;
- Understanding of board role and responsibilities;
- Ability to delegate management and operational matters to staff;
- Proven collaborative skills in a diverse environment;
- Emotional strength, strong listening skills and accepting of conflict;
- Retired, self-employed, stay-at-home parent or otherwise able to devote substantial time to the role.

Other desirable characteristics in a board member, important but not necessarily sufficient by themselves, might include:

- Representing the voice of a specific ethnic, geographic or interest community;
- Experience of the educational system, whether as a parent, volunteer, activist or professional;
- Experience with board-staff relationships;
- Experience with budgets and financial matters;
- Experience using and interpreting data to set policy.

Voter and community awareness. The characteristics of effective boards and board members are not always well understood by individuals seeking election, or by voters. The demands of the role, in terms of time commitment and temperament, often do not become clear to an individual until a board member has been elected and has served through a period of conflict or public controversy.

Idealists intent on making a difference on a particular issue sometimes make attractive board candidates but are not always successful as long term board members. Voters may find an articulate, politically astute candidate appealing, especially if the candidate is taking a position on a “hot” issue of the day such as charter schools or standardized testing, and not understand that **a position on an issue is insufficient qualification for the role of school board member.**

Investing in stability and quality. To many well-qualified board candidates or board members, a position on the school board seems to be a thankless job with few rewards. From our survey and interviews, we found that especially in the larger, more diverse districts, many board members and community stakeholders support pay for the school board member role. An interviewee in Kent told the Committee:

 *Board members must be paid in order for them to focus on this incredibly challenging and important elected position. I believe this is the biggest obstacle with our school board...that work commitments prevent board members from paying detailed attention to our constituents, budget, and student priorities.*

State Representative Reuven Carlyle has sponsored legislation authorizing districts with over 20,000 students to vote to pay their board members up to the same compensation paid to legislators, most recently about \$42,000 per year. In the 2015 legislative session, the bill was introduced as HB 1665. At the time the Legislature adjourned, the bill had not received a hearing in committee.

Recommendation 2a: Individuals thinking of running for school board are urged to take a course or seminar, perhaps offered by WSSDA or another organization, to gauge their fit with the role and to prepare themselves for skills they’ll need and issues they will confront on the job.

Recommendation 2b: State policymakers should consider passage of legislation authorizing larger districts to compensate board members for their service.



FINDING
3

Not all school districts in King County have developed clear, focused strategic plans with measurable objectives. Some plans are vague and aspirational, and fail to articulate a strategic direction for the superintendent to implement. Some districts have failed to adequately leverage their plans to gain community buy-in.

Significant progress on improving student achievement requires tight and consistent focus, unified leadership, strong buy-in from teachers and parents, and thoughtful strategy. This is most commonly attempted using a strategic plan, which sets measurable goals for a period of three to five years. A strategic plan is a means to unify governance and management for the duration of time, which is generally recognized as necessary to make lasting systemic progress.

A strategic plan also provides an internal and external accountability system by choosing measurable and meaningful goals. Graduation rates, reading proficiency at 3rd grade, attendance and discipline rates are examples of common measures. These are easily incorporated into the school board's evaluation of the superintendent's performance and could be useful to voters in evaluating the effectiveness of a school board or of school board candidates.

Policy changes to advance these goals, such as programs of targeted interventions, wrap-around services or extended learning days for at-risk students, ending out-of-school suspensions, or higher funding for high poverty schools are the kinds of decisions school boards must make to advance a strategic plan. These can be controversial and difficult, involving political risk, but they also establish "ownership" of the strategic plan by the board and by extension, the community. This effect gradually fades over time and a new round of outreach and deliberation is needed as circumstances change, or as board composition changes, or as superintendents come and go.

All of the districts the Committee interviewed are using strategic plans, with the number of measurable goals varying from five to twenty plus. A Lake Washington stakeholder told the Committee:

 *It helped the board focus on the right stuff. Before, the board would concentrate on, say, details of a change order. The conversation shifted to student learning. The board is more data-based and referencing the goals in light of the values.*

In another example, Kent was notable for making significant progress on its goals. A former district staff person attributed their success to unified leadership, a stable school board, strong community commitment and motivated staff. The Committee noted that some strategic plans seem to have too many aspirational goals that prevent boards from focusing and directing management attention and resources effectively.

Recommendation 3a: All King County school districts should be using strategic plans to focus and unify their governance and management around a few key goals for student learning. Plans should be built around a small number of measurable objectives, not simply vague aspirational goals. These plans should be developed with broad community input and awareness, and should be used by the community to monitor and evaluate the district's performance.

Recommendation 3b: The Municipal League will emphasize the role of a strategic plan in its school board candidate rating process. Discussion of district strategic planning and goals should become part of the public election process for school board office.



FINDING
4

Board and superintendent continuity is essential to implement strategic goals, which often require three to five years of sustained attention.

The relationship between a school board and school superintendent is perhaps the single most important arena for creating effective governance. Ideally, neither party would dominate, and a high level of trust and mutual confidence would pervade the relationship. Communication would be frequent and meaningful, and boundaries and roles between management and governance would be clearly established and respected.

All models of governance examined by this study agreed on these ground rules but varied on the nature and scope of communication, responsibility and governance boundaries. This relationship strongly determines whether a school board works effectively with and through its superintendent. When school board members intervene with school staff and school principals, especially when approached or pressured by parents or interest groups to obtain an outcome outside of the public policy process, the board may be characterized as micro-managing. On the other hand, if board members pass such issues along to the superintendent and see that they are followed up in a reasonable time frame, the relationship is working. If board members overload the staff with emergent issues, little time or few resources are available to pursue the larger district goals.

Boards that enforce norms of behavior and clear boundaries, and superintendents who serve and take direction from their board are more likely to succeed and have longer tenures. The board employs the superintendent but must also work with that person as part of a governance team. The superintendent must operate the district as CEO but also provide meaningful options for board decisions, keep the board fully apprised of both success and failure, and be evaluated each year.

In the Committee's interviews, superintendents stated clearly that they needed the public support of their boards to operate and especially to take controversial action. Board members felt vulnerable to public pressure and needed superintendents to give them "wins" with the community. Generally, this would mean that the school district was responsive to broad community concerns, making progress on student achievement, and being recognized for success at the school or district level.

The board-superintendent relationship is more difficult when turnover on either side is high. For example, a community stakeholder in Federal Way told the Committee:

“Currently the board is engaged in controlling chaos. There has been churn and the previous superintendent was a mistake. They need to get it back together under a new leader.

It takes time to build trust and norms, as well as a clear policy direction and authority for the top manager. In one district, an interviewee told the Committee that the superintendent's relationship with the board had been very good: "This is partly because the board hired him. When they hire you, they're all with you."

Public understanding of the school board's role is generally low, and expectations of a superintendent's ability to solve complex, long standing issues is often high. This puts added pressure on the relationship as well as promotes turnover in both roles.

Recommendation 4: Districts should make efforts to improve the public understanding of what an effective board-superintendent relationship looks like to improve the relationship and reduce turnover. School boards need to be transparent when hiring a superintendent on what type of relationship they expect.



School boards need formalized mechanisms for data reporting and sharing so that they can be well-informed on their district's performance and can exercise their oversight role.

School boards are primarily charged with developing policy for the district and overseeing the superintendent. Few board members come to the job with the professional background or experience that would equip them to understand the scope of academic, financial, operational, and regulatory issues that all districts must manage.

In order to responsibly oversee district operations and develop policy, school board members need mechanisms for becoming informed about issues and gathering data and information on district operations and programs. A survey respondent from Mercer Island told the Committee:

“There are some areas that in order to make adequate policy, we need more detailed data on teachers, students, and achievement. It takes the system way too long to recognize problems and make necessary changes. Sometimes we never recognize problems...

While school boards require information to do their jobs well, the demands for data can overwhelm the



superintendent and district staff, and consequently fail to inform the board's strategic plan and limit the ability of the board to provide effective oversight.

These tensions—between the demand, need, and use of information—were highlighted in our interviews by numerous stakeholders, including current and former board members, district staff, and community members. As one interviewee observed:

“ *There is a tremendous gap between what the people in the system know, what the people on the board know, and what people in the public know.*

A number of the districts the Committee interviewed used mechanisms such as the quarterly or semi-annual retreat and regular board study sessions to share data on overall district trends, progress toward strategic plan goals and emerging issues. Board members and superintendents reported that these sessions work well, as all board members receive the same information and can ask questions and discuss the significance of the data in a less formal setting.

The amount of data, how data are presented, which questions they are intended to address, and their policy implications can and should be agreed upon by board and staff before the session. Data

reporting becomes routine, and there is a clear understanding on both board and staff sides of expectations and use of data. Another mechanism the Committee heard about was the superintendent's "Friday memo" to the board, outlining the weekly status of a broad range of district matters.

A mechanism we heard about that was less effective and in fact frustrated district staff was the uncontrolled demand for research and data on any number of issues of personal interest to individual board members. Unchannelled and unfiltered by overall board policy and goals, such personal requests can overwhelm staff and take an excessive amount of time away from priority issues. One survey respondent stated:

“ *It is vital to establish communication protocols with each other, determining priority of ad hoc requests for information.*

In another district, the superintendent told the Committee he needed to make sure that protocols were followed when communicating with the board. One member might ask a question, but if it is information about the district, the response needs to be shared with the entire board. There should not be one board member who has an information advantage over the other board members.

Recommendation 5a: Boards should establish and follow procedures for making data and information requests of staff. These might include requirements that requests be supported by a majority of board members to discourage requests that are based on the personal interests of board members.

Recommendation 5b: Boards should develop a process to determine what data the superintendent and staff will produce to meet strategic planning needs, and to reduce the number of requests for additional data.



School boards need to find ways to build civic capital and trust among their members, with management, and with their communities to avoid excessive conflict or factionalism.

The Committee's review of the literature on school board governance as well as our interviews with school board members and school district stakeholders revealed an inherent tension in the job: School board members are elected officials who come to the office with their constituents interests in mind, and they are also members of a body expected to coalesce around a broad vision and mission for successful schools.

On the one hand, academic models of school board governance direct school board members to focus on policies that will ensure that the district achieves the goals developed in its strategic plan. But on the other hand, as elected officials, school board members must be responsive to the concerns of their constituents, which may result in individual members becoming involved in matters important to a single group or that reach into the management domain. One board member stated to the Committee:

“People get engaged over issues (mine was high-stakes testing) and people bring certain issues to the position... but once you're on the board you should have a broader perspective. Think of not just your issue, but also every link in the chain. We don't have the luxury to concentrate on just one issue.”

The American system of democratic governance assumes that the 'conflict' of competing interests will be addressed fairly if put forward in an organized and transparent fashion before those elected by a majority of the public. The influence of excessive factionalism on governance is defined by one faction's specific interest being viewed as greater than the good of the whole.

Some school boards struggle with special interest factionalism in which disagreement over a single controversial issue may come to dominate relationships, and board members cannot focus on achieving the district's overarching goals. While some conflict between board members, superintendents, and staff is inevitable, our interviews suggest over time that excessive conflict undermines the ability of a school district to carry out adopted goals, and therefore, provide sustainable academic and financial performance outcomes. Districts characterized by excessive conflict were:

- Less likely to report good relationships with the community or among board members;
- More likely to experience high levels of turnover among board members and staff.
- Conflict has its roots in many sources:
- Larger and more demographically diverse school districts were more likely to be characterized by excessive conflict;
- Absence of a shared vision about the appropriate role of the board creates tension between communities, board members, and district staff. This tension is exacerbated by frequent turnover on the board, thereby creating a self-reinforcing cycle;
- No strategy for proactively engaging communities. Community politics becomes the “squeaky wheel” that board members engage with reactively;
- Lack of a strategic plan that has strong community buy-in.

More opportunities for informal discussion. The Committee heard from multiple interviewees of a strong need for more time to get to know fellow board members in a setting other than formal board meetings. Without this, members are left to meeting in groups smaller than a majority of the board in order to comply with the Open Public Meetings Act.

In districts with five-member boards (all of them in the state except Seattle, which has seven), just two people may meet without triggering the open meeting requirement. Two people meeting to discuss an issue means three people are excluded. When the next public meeting happens, those two people are now aware of each other's opinions and knowledge on the issue, and they may have even worked out

an agreement on a particular position. This is a breeding ground for factionalism, not trust and effective policy-making.

Recommendation 6a: To limit excessive ideological factionalism and focus on single issues, school board members should agree to practice good governance as described in this report. School boards should consider asking themselves to adopt an agreement similar to the following: We will be dedicated to effective and responsive school board governance to promote the vision and mission of this school district. We will collaborate with each other to promote those policies and practices that will help achieve our common goals.

Recommendation 6b: Boards should develop consensus among sitting board members about the appropriate roles, responsibilities, and communication strategies of the board. Ensure that this vision is passed along as turnover occurs on the board.

Recommendation 6c: Districts should schedule more time for boards to get to know fellow board members in settings other than formal board meetings. Study sessions, retreats, and social events, not just for new members, create opportunities to exchange ideas and develop relationships.



School boards need to develop a proactive strategy for ongoing public communication, outreach, and community engagement. In some districts community outreach seems to be not effectively organized, and the attention tends to go to the “squeaky wheels” rather than broadly to the full range of constituencies.

In order for a school board to be successful, it needs to engage the community, not just in the development of its strategic plan, but on an ongoing basis. It also needs to avoid communication that is primarily reactive to “squeaky wheels” or that seeks to play a primarily constituent service role, thereby ending up intervening in operational matters. A stakeholder in Federal Way stated:

“Individual parents often see no obvious channels of communication. There are opportunities for 3-minute presentations at meetings, but often board members seem inattentive and focused on getting on with their agenda.”

School board members are elected, unpaid volunteers charged with oversight of tens, if not hundreds, of millions of dollars in public monies and a complicated educational environment. It can be intimidating for any individual to absorb the responsibilities of the role. The time requirements to effectively serve in public office are demanding. A board member must be informed on issues, travel to meetings, and respond meaningfully to constituent requests. He or she must ensure board policy is being followed and the public is informed and engaged in the business of effectively educating the community’s children.

As discussed in other sections, it can be difficult for board members who lack experience or who are overwhelmed with the time commitment to engage in the kind of ongoing outreach and responsiveness necessary to maintain the support of the community.

Recommendation 7a: School districts should dedicate one person to supporting school board members by identifying and scheduling outreach opportunities, school related events, speaking engagements, and meetings with a range of community groups. A coordinated proactive plan of communication can ensure a wide range of community stakeholders are reached and board member time is used strategically given their availability.

Recommendation 7b: School districts should designate a Constituent Ombudsperson position to serve as the portal for parent and community issues about the district. The Ombudsperson would ensure that all requests are addressed by the appropriate district personnel and that the inquirer is responded to in a timely manner.

CONCLUSION

In this report we have highlighted many of the typical challenges school boards face: board member inexperience, the many hours per week board business requires, various communication and relationship issues among board members and between board members and superintendents, frequent board and superintendent turnover and lack of continuity of plans, and conflict and factionalism that hinder effective collaboration.

To address these and other board issues, this report identifies strategies of effective boards and makes recommendations to encourage school boards in King County to focus on practicing the best governance possible to serve the students, families, and citizens of their districts. We highlight the need to build civic capital, trust, and collaboration between boards and superintendents; to engage in understanding community needs and parent feedback; to reduce turnover and focus on the three- to five-year horizon needed to have measurable impact on goals; to enhance professional development of board members; and to reduce excessive factionalism that plagues some boards.

The Municipal League in its own right commits to improving its candidate evaluation ratings process to incorporate questions based on the conclusions of this report, including the role of strategic planning and candidates' ability to collaborate to achieve common goals. We invite public comment and feedback on this report, and we encourage citizens in King County to engage in a debate about the findings and recommendations we present here.



ATTACHMENT A

KING COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT DATA

Seattle	51,738
Kent	27,688
Lake Washington	26,001
Federal Way	21,200
Northshore	20,642
Bellevue	18,953
Highline	18,882
Issaquah	18,862
Renton	15,116
Auburn	14,987
Shoreline	8,988
Tahoma	7,836
Snoqualmie Valley	6,357
Enumclaw	4,401
Mercer Island	4,337
Riverview	3,313
Tukwila	2,950
Vashon Island	1,560
Skykomish	42
Source: OSPI Washington State Report Card, October 2013	

Observations: The largest districts are Seattle with nearly 52,000 students, Kent with 28,000 and Lake Washington with 26,000.

The smallest are Skykomish, Vashon Island and Tukwila.

TABLE 2: DISTRICTS BY PERCENTAGE OF FREE & REDUCED LUNCH	%
Skykomish	81.1
Tukwila	79.4
Highline	69.3
Federal Way	59.7
Auburn	54.3
Renton	53.7
Kent	52.4
Seattle	39.9
Enumclaw	30.4
Shoreline	27.1
Vashon Island	22.6
Bellevue	19.6
Riverview	17.4
Northshore	17.3
Lake Washington	14.5
Tahoma	14.5
Snoqualmie Valley	12.6
Issaquah	9.3
Mercer Island	3.7
Source: OSPI Washington State Report Card, October 2013	

Observations: The districts with the highest percent of free and reduced lunch are Tukwila with 79% and Highline with 69% (not including the Skykomish School District which has just 42 students, 81% of whom qualify for free and reduced lunch). Federal Way, Auburn, Renton, and Kent also have large percentages of students from low income families.

Mercer Island, Issaquah and Snoqualmie Valley districts in East King County have the wealthiest student profiles.

Seattle, which has a wide socio-economic distribution, has about 40% of its students on free and reduced lunch, falling near the middle of the range among King County districts.

TABLE 3: DISTRICTS BY ETHNICITY*	% Asian / Pacific Islander	% Black	% Hispanic / Latino	% White
Skykomish	0.0	0.0	14.3	85.7
Snoqualmie Valley	4.9	0.9	6.0	84.0
Riverview	3.1	0.8	10.9	80.1
Vashon Island	2.6	0.8	10.1	78.2
Tahoma	4.5	1.7	8.8	77.1
Enumclaw	0.9	0.6	12.0	74.5
Mercer Island	18.7	1.4	3.9	69.9
Northshore	14.2	1.8	12.5	63.7
Issaquah	23.7	1.8	7.4	61.4
Lake Washington	20.1	1.6	10.2	61.4
Shoreline	14.6	6.4	12.2	55.6
Auburn	10.6	6.8	24.6	47.9
Seattle	17.2	17.1	12.6	44.7
Bellevue	32.7	2.7	11.5	44.4
Kent	19.7	12.2	20.9	37.8
Federal Way	16.1	11.3	26.3	33.4
Renton	25.8	17.7	21.3	28.4
Highline	18.7	11.5	37.0	24.1
Tukwila	30.9	21.2	27.0	13.8
* Race / ethnicity figures do not add to 100% because not all groups are included here				
Source: OSPI Washington State Report Card, October 2013				

Observations: The districts with the smallest proportions of non-white students are the rural East King County districts of Skykomish (86% white), Snoqualmie Valley (84% white), and Riverview (80% white).

The largest minority student populations can be found in Tukwila (86% non-white) and Highline (76% non-white). Tukwila's minority students are closely split between Asian/Pacific Islander (31%) and Latino/Hispanic (27%), with African-American students a smaller proportion at 21%. Highline has a larger proportion of Latino/Hispanic students (37%) and smaller proportions of Asian/Pacific Islander (19%) and African-American (12%).

Among the largest districts, Seattle is 55% minority, Kent is 62% minority and Lake Washington is 39% minority.

TABLE 4: DISTRICT SPENDING	Total District Budget**	Total Spending per Pupil	Instructional Budget	Instructional Spending per Pupil	Percent Spent on Instruction
Skykomish	\$2,104,208	\$50,100	\$1,126,014	\$26,810	54
Seattle	639,298,428	12,356	503,576,511	9,733	79
Tukwila	37,097,455	12,575	27,133,941	9,198	73
Bellevue	216,298,456	11,412	163,488,658	8,626	76
Federal Way	224,464,000	10,588	179,584,963	8,471	80
Highline	209,247,922	11,082	158,268,795	8,382	76
Mercer Island	48,331,275	11,144	36,273,121	8,364	75
Auburn	158,891,993	10,602	123,891,908	8,267	78
Kent	287,525,409	10,384	224,742,674	8,117	78
Enumclaw	47,114,041	10,705	35,672,517	8,106	76
Shoreline	95,951,763	10,676	72,808,507	8,101	76
Renton	158,176,074	10,464	122,007,291	8,071	77
Lake Washington	258,730,738	9,951	209,674,056	8,064	81
Northshore	202,750,000	9,822	161,011,739	7,800	79
Tahoma	75,727,751	9,664	60,365,807	7,704	80
Vashon Island	16,646,918	10,671	11,764,439	7,541	71
Issaquah	183,013,049	9,703	139,820,210	7,413	76
Snoqualmie Valley	59,625,283	9,379	45,855,628	7,213	77
Riverview	31,634,538	9,549	23,788,926	7,180	75

Source: All spending figures from 2013-2014 budget amounts as reported in OSPI F-195 Budget Reports

Observations: The largest districts (including Seattle, Kent, and Lake Washington) were able to allocate approximately 80% of their spending to instruction, yielding the observation that there seem to be economies of scale in administration of larger districts.

The smallest districts (Skykomish, Vashon, Tukwila) spent greater proportions of their budgets on non-instructional services.

Seattle had the highest instructional spending per pupil at \$9,733 (not including outlier Skykomish). This represented 79% of Seattle's total spending, close to the high of 80% to 81% among the most efficient districts.

TABLE 5: STUDENT PERFORMANCE DATA (2013-14)															
	4-Year Graduation Rate %	3rd Grade Reading - Met Standard %							7th Grade Math - Met Standard %						
		Total	Asian / Pacific Islander	Black	Hispanic / Latino	White	Low Income	Total	Asian / Pacific Islander	Black	Hispanic / Latino	White	Low Income		
	100.0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	
	93.0	94.9	>95	N/A	78.5	>95	80.0	88.8	94.2	N/A	64.7	89.0	62.5		
	92.9	88.3	90.7	N/A	75.4	89.1	65.8	84.2	92.6	50.0	62.6	85.2	51.0		
	89.6	84.5	90.9	78.2	64.4	88.2	61.0	76.8	87.0	46.8	50.2	80.5	50.8		
	88.9	84.3	91.7	N/A	67.5	85.3	65.4	78.0	93.2	N/A	44.5	79.4	51.9		
	88.6	87.8	93.5	N/A	69.4	88.4	66.1	82.2	92.2	N/A	53.6	84.4	52.6		
	87.7	89.7	84.6	N/A	81.3	91.2	80.4	74.0	66.6	46.1	66.0	76.0	68.2		
	87.6	80.0	N/A	N/A	42.3	85.8	48.9	74.5	N/A	N/A	53.5	79.3	57.6		
	83.0	82.5	85.0	N/A	65.6	88.2	68.9	72.9	82.4	N/A	43.7	78.3	56.7		
	82.2	56.5	N/A	N/A	N/A	82.6	62.9	73.7	N/A	N/A	N/A	79.2	44.4		
	81.7	88.2	N/A	N/A	73.9	88.7	76.5	84.0	90.0	N/A	66.6	84.8	55.8		
	81.2	69.9	N/A	N/A	49.0	74.8	52.2	75.4	N/A	N/A	70.5	78.3	63.8		
	78.7	69.4	76.5	51.1	58.9	78.4	59.2	66.6	76.4	40.6	50.4	76.8	52.5		
	74.7	78.2	80.3	69.6	70.8	83.8	71.3	47.1	49.5	28.9	33.5	57.9	37.2		
	73.5	73.7	83.3	66.6	56.2	81.0	64.6	56.4	73.8	32.9	40.8	67.3	42.4		
	72.8	63.2	71.6	54.3	54.0	74.8	54.0	46.2	57.8	27.4	31.0	59.8	34.9		
	72.6	77.6	79.8	55.5	58.0	89.5	59.3	70.0	78.9	36.2	53.3	84.2	49.9		
	62.3	58.1	62.5	58.0	43.5	77.7	50.6	57.1	67.1	30.8	49.2	70.7	49.2		
	57.3	52.3	54.3	47.0	53.4	83.3	48.8	37.9	44.9	14.2	32.0	52.7	33.7		
Source: OSPI Washington State Report Card															

OBSERVATIONS ON GRADUATION RATES

The highest graduation rates are in the wealthiest districts in King County, with Mercer Island (93%), Issaquah (93%), Northshore (90%), Bellevue (89%) and Lake Washington (89%) districts having the highest rates.

The exception to this pattern is Skykomish School District with an 81% free and reduced lunch student population and a 100% graduation rate. (We assume the sample size for the graduation class may have been only a few students.)

Tukwila and Highline, with the highest poverty levels at 79% and 69% respectively, also had the lowest graduation rates at 57% and 62%, confirming the troubling correlation between poverty and poor student outcomes.

Northshore school district, with a free and reduced lunch population of 17% still achieved a graduation rate of nearly 90%, resembling much wealthier districts.

Another observation concerned Seattle and Kent, districts with 40% and 52% poverty rates, respectively, but graduation rates obverse to their free and reduced lunch proportions, namely a graduation rate of 73% in Seattle and 79% in Kent.

Seattle's graduation rate is very similar to Federal Way's, but Federal Way has 20% more free and reduced lunch students.

OBSERVATIONS ON THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

Every district in King County has an achievement gap between all of its students and its low income students, as well its children of color and white children, in reading in 3rd grade and math in 7th grade.

The gap ranges between 8% and 40% for all children compared to low income children.

The achievement gap between students with free and reduced lunch and all other students is striking. In Tukwila, the 3rd grade reading gap is 4%, and in Kent, the gap is about 10%. In Lake Washington, it is 22%. The largest reading gap is in Riverview at 31%.

The 7th grade math gap between students with free and reduced lunch and all other students is 20% in Seattle. In Northshore it is 26%, and in Issaquah it is 33%.

We noted disparities by ethnicity in several wealthier districts where white students were performing at standard in 3rd grade reading around 90% of the time. Latino students were meeting the 3rd grade reading standard only 64% of the time in Northshore, 69% of the time in Lake Washington, and 75% of the time in Issaquah school districts.

Another disparity existed between Black students and Latino students as compared to White students in terms of reading scores. For example, in Highline district 58% of Black students and 44% of Latino students were reading at standard in 3rd grade, while 78% of White students were meeting standard. A similar disparity existed in Northshore, where 78% of Black students and only 64% of Latinos students were reading at standard, compared to 88% for White students.

The largest achievement gaps between black and white students in 3rd grade reading are in Tukwila and Seattle.

TABLE 6: PERCENT SCHOOL BOARD TURNOVER 2000-2014	
Federal Way	129
Seattle	129
Skykomish	93
Mercer Island	93
Northshore	79
Issaquah	71
Vashon Island	71
Snoqualmie Valley	71
Highline	71
Shoreline	64
Enumclaw	64
Kent	64
Bellevue	57
Tukwila	57
Riverview	50
Renton	43
Lake Washington	36
Auburn	36
Tahoma	21
Source: Washington State School Directors Association	

Observations: Tahoma, Auburn, Lake Washington and Renton experienced the greatest board continuity over 14 years.

Federal Way and Seattle experienced the highest turnover at 129% each.

ATTACHMENT B

SUMMARY OF SURVEY RESPONSES

ONLINE SURVEY OF BOARD MEMBERS AND SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS

During January and February 2015, the Municipal League's Education Committee conducted an online survey of school district board members and school superintendents in King County. An email invitation was sent to all current members of the 19 school districts in the county and their superintendents. The total number invited to respond was approximately 116; responses were received from 44 individuals (36%), representing 16 school districts. Responses are not differentiated by board/superintendent role.

The survey respondents were promised confidentiality, and their identities were not tracked. The summary of responses below is based generally on the entire response sample, except in a few instances where we broke down the responses into categories of larger and smaller districts. Sample sizes from individual districts were not large enough to allow analysis of responses by district.

In addition to reporting survey results below, we offer some limited commentary interpreting the results and how they relate to our report findings or other sections of this report.

Total responses: 44

School boards responding: 16 of 19

We received 19 responses from the Eastside, 15 from North and Central Seattle, and 10 from South King County.

LENGTH OF SERVICE:

Two-thirds of respondents have served more than 4 years

One-third have served 4 or fewer years

Only a handful of board members who responded have served for more than 8 years.

AVERAGE WEEKLY TIME SPENT ON BOARD BUSINESS:

35% spend 3-6 hours

28% spend 6-10 hours

9% spend 10-15 hours

28% spend more than 15 hours

A clear majority (60%) of board member in larger districts say they spend more than 15 hours per week on board business. While a few members in mid-size and small districts also report more than 15 hours per week, the great majority report between 3-10 hours per week of work. This shows a clear difference in workload and time investment in larger/high needs districts.

PERCENTAGE OF TIME ON CATEGORIES OF BUSINESS (HOW RANKED):

Operational matters: Large majority (70%) spend up to 25%; few spend >51%

Constituent services: Large majority (91%) spend up to 25%

Strategic planning/policy: Half spend up to 25%; one-quarter spend up to 50%; one-quarter spend more than 50%

Other activities: Large majority (77%) spend up to 25%; 19% spend up to 50%

STATEMENTS OF BOARD PRIORITIES IN ONE SENTENCE:

18 statements generally cite “preparing students,” “providing skills,” “opportunities for all,” “improving education and reducing gaps,” and “equity”

25 statements are more specific; 9 mention “policy or policies,” 7 finance/budget/resources, 6+ strategic planning/goals

Some mentioned community connections, communication, and other issues

“WHAT ARE THE GREATEST OBSTACLES?”

Clear consensus

Inadequate funding/resources: #1

Variation in student background/ability: #2

Inadequate data for evaluation: #3

REPEAT MENTIONS

Conflict over board priorities

Inadequate community outreach and communication

Time spent on stakeholder/constituent issues

Teaching staff quality or turnover

Non-teacher staff quality/turnover

School board member turnover

Involvement in operations issues

ADDITIONAL MENTIONS

No clear model for governance

Voters don’t understand...elect activists with narrow agenda

Bad state guidance on curriculum

Failure to engage in systems thinking; inadequate board member knowledge

Getting parental engagement in students’ education

Repeated discussion w/o action; tangential conversations

Lack of diversity among board members, upper management/staff

Qualifications of board members

Various mentions of inadequate funding/resources/space, etc.

Superintendent turnover; board member turnover

Unfunded mandates from legislature; state/federal requirements (including standardized testing)

Teachers’ unions, teacher tenure

Board focus on tactics, not strategy

Inadequate time for in-depth study

Board understanding of responsibilities and authority to act

Board (un)willingness to question the superintendent

Two of the three most frequently mentioned obstacles to effective board governance are outside the control of the school board (inadequate funding/resources, variation in student background/ability). The third most frequently mentioned obstacle (inadequate data for evaluation) was somewhat of a surprise to us, as we learned from our interviews that all districts we spoke to have regular board work sessions and day-long retreats to review data and receive briefings on trends.

(As discussed in the Overview section of this report, we note that even some of the most high-performing affluent districts struggle with an achievement gap between low income students and their general population and between minority and white students. Many districts have established goals to address these issues, and we believe that this should be viewed as a challenge to be managed rather than an “obstacle.”)

RESPONSES TO FOUR BOARD STATEMENTS

Members of our board have a common understanding of mission/goals (81% agree or strongly agree)

Mission/goals always guide policy decisions (81% agree or strongly agree)

Have a process for annual strategic planning (79% agree or strongly agree)

Current strategic plan is adequate to focus work (79% agree or strongly agree)

These responses indicate that a strong majority of the survey respondents believe they are performing as effective boards, according to the definition adopted by our Committee.

RESPONSES TO FIVE “RATING” STATEMENT

How voters in district would rate: 82% good/excellent...18% poor/fair

How respondent rates board: 79% good/excellent...21% poor/fair

How respondent rates own performance: 95% good/excellent...no poor/fair

How respondent rates superintendent performance: 86% good/excellent...7% poor/fair

How respondent rates board chair: 83% good/excellent...only one poor/fair

Voter Perception. The most affluent of the districts have the most positive sense of how respondents think voters perceive them. All the other districts have wide variations, but have significant numbers of Fairs, Neutrals, and Poores.

Rating Your Own Performance. People tend to view themselves better than they view other people. Only 2 respondents rated themselves Neutral in their own performance. All others rated themselves Good or Excellent.

Rating the Board as a whole. Following with other trends, of the 10 people who rated the board performance as Fair or Poor, 7 of them were in the largest and smallest districts, and NONE of them were in the affluent suburban districts that also rated everything else Excellent, Agree, and positive.

The affluent districts have the highest self-perception, board ratings, and superintendent ratings, by far, compared to all other districts whether urban, rural, or suburban. It is clear that serving on boards in districts like these entails less strain on the person's emotions, work life, stress, and personal investment. Thus, we can conclude that boards with few internal or perception problems are likely to exist in districts with high affluence and family and social stability.

SHOULD BOARDS RECEIVE SALARIES?

Small: 50% yes. Mid-size: 33% yes. Large: 60% yes.

While there was clear disagreement on the issue of pay for school board service, from within districts, types, and regions, it was interesting that members from smaller and larger districts favored higher salaries much more than those from the mid-size ones. There is a clear correlation between time spent on board work and the desire for a salary, and this is highest among the larger districts that have more challenges with their student and family populations. This is in line with the higher workload for those districts.

ATTACHMENT C

MEMBERS OF THE MUNICIPAL LEAGUE EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Kathy Elias, Chair	Phil Gousman
Ashley Jochim, Vice Chair	Dan Magill
Rory O’Sullivan, Vice Chair	Robert Moore
Peter Aberg	Will Niccolls
Glenn Anderson	Lynn Ormsby
Mona Bailey	Luisa Sanchez-Nilsen
Nancy Burkhalter	Alan Sutliff
Melanie Coerver	Judy Turpin
Michael DeBell	
Sandra Driscoll	Ex Officio:
	Chuck Sloane
	Alejandra Tres

The committee wishes to thank the following experts who came to speak to the Committee:

Tom Alsbury
Alan Burke
Bob Hughes
Rick Maloney
Paul Hill

ATTACHMENT D

INDIVIDUALS INTERVIEWED

Federal Way School District

Jason Brown
Geoffrey McAnallooy
Dr. Robert McKenzie, Jr.
Skip Priest

Highline School District

Bernie Dorsey
Dr. Susan Enfield
Susan Goding

Kent School District

Dr. Tony Apostle
Jim Berrios
Bob Boesche
Russ Hanscom
Dee Klem
Cindy Prescott
Dr. Lee Vargas
Maya Vengadasalam

Lake Washington School District

Janene Fogard
Dr. Traci Pierce

Seattle School District

Sherry Carr
Rita Green
Jonathan Knapp
Lauren McGuire
Marty McLaren
Larry Nyland
Sara Morris
Erin Okuno
Alan Sugiyama
Frieda Takamura
Kevin Washington
Melissa Westbrook
Charles Wright

ATTACHMENT E

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1 Howard County Library System **2** Poughkeepsie Day School **3** US Dept of Education **4** Pasco County Schools
5 Eaglebrook County Schools **6** United Way of the Lower Mainland **7** Howard County Library System **8** US Dept of Education