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Leadership and Rural School Boards: Utah Data

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Introduction

School boards have managed the affairs of local American education since 1642. The legacy of these boards is a public school system serving urban and rural youth across the nation, the only system in the world that seeks to provide all of a nation's children with an appropriate education.

In this decade the role of school boards in school governance has increasingly been called into question. Critics of the boards and their performance vary in the vindictiveness of their charges. The National School Boards Association (1990) insists that local boards, especially in rural areas are still the natural leaders of education. The Twentieth Century/Danforth Foundation (1990) charges that local school boards have lost the overall vision of their governance role; this group recommends that roles be redefined and that local district governance undergo significant change. Other critics, including Coombs (1985), charge that "existing formal education systems everywhere [are] growing increasingly obsolete and maladjusted in relation to their rapidly changing societies. . . . all these systems require major changes and innovations" (p. 21). Still other critics advocate that school boards be eliminated altogether, and that school governance be conducted by individual schools and their patrons (Chubb & Moe, 1990).

Despite the controversy, little empirical data exists as to how school boards actually conduct their business. Hange and Leary (1991) note that while much is written about school boards, most of this literature is limited to suggestions from superintendents and past board members. Little analysis has been made of what boards actually do. This scarcity of information is particularly striking where rural school districts are concerned. Not only is there little empirical data, but even the term rural school district lacks clear definition (Stem, 1994).

Purpose of the Study

This descriptive study sought to distinguish rural from urban school districts in the State of Utah, then to investigate the nature of voted board decisions to determine to what extent rural Utah school boards engage in building community and discussing state and national reform.

Methodology

A descriptive study (Gay, 1992) seeks to develop a philosophical and cultural foundation for future research. To develop such a foundation for the roles and perspective of rural school boards in the State of Utah, the researchers identified rural school districts in the state, collected minutes of school board meetings, and categorized the board votes recorded within these minutes.

In Utah, school districts located in the densely populated area along the western slope of the Wasatch Mountains have a distinctly urban atmosphere, quite different from districts across the rest of the state. Though more concrete demographics must be used to make consistent distinctions between rural and urban districts, this general atmosphere is pertinent as well. Hite, Zarndt and Schmidt (1992) have developed a format which considers both aspects of the urban-rural distinction, also acknowledging the tendency of Utah districts to follow county lines. This format was selected for the present study. According to Hite, Zarndt and Schmidt's distinction, a district is considered rural if it meets less than four of the following five conditions:

1. The district has at least 10,000 students (Curriculum Information Center, 1991).
2. The district is within a "standard metropolitan area" as defined by the 1990 U.S. Census (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1992).
3. The human population density of the county is at least 150 persons per square mile (Bureau of Economic and Business Research, 1990).
4. At least forty percent (40%) of the population of the county in which the district is located lives in cities of at least 5,000 persons (U.S. Department of commerce, 1992).
5. A four-year degree-granting institution of higher learning is located within the boundaries of the district (The College Blue Book, 1991).

Based on these conditions, 31 of Utah's 40 school districts were determined to be rural districts.

Each rural district was then contacted by letter or by telephone and requested to provide the complete minutes of two board meetings for each year from January 1972 through December 1992. Since not all districts were able to

locate all possible minutes for this time period, the researchers suggested that the minutes be selected to represent the various seasons of the year equally. All districts participated in the study. Eliminating incomplete minutes, which were not used in the study, the usable minutes were found to contain 5,250 (n=5250) voted decisions.

To develop a foundation for analyzing the roles and perspectives of these rural boards, the researchers then categorized the recorded voting according to designations that emerged from a similar study done in West Virginia (Hange & Leary, 1991). Results were verified through a triangulation process.

Major Findings

Analysis of the board decisions reveals a pattern of preoccupation with the details of governance. Of 5,250 voted decisions made by boards during these meetings, nearly 65% dealt with finance and personnel issues. Table 1 portrays the range and proportion of the decisions made by

Utah's rural school boards during these selected meetings.

In addition to the types of decisions made by boards, other patterns emerged from the minutes that suggest how these boards govern rural education. It appears that boards are not unaware of major state and national reform movements, but these reforms are not the focus of frequent discussion. Reference was made to such reforms on only 49 occasions. Unfortunately, the minutes do not reflect the actual time committed to analysis and discussion of the reforms themselves, nor the degree of board commitment to the implications of these reforms.

Finally, the minutes suggest that rural boards are more involved in building community in collaboration with patrons and area businesses than in discussing state and national reform issues. The minutes record 114 such instances. Many of these instances, however, convey a rather negative tone. On these negative occasions the board appeared to be responding defensively to community frustrations over previous or misunderstood board action rather than actively building community relations.

Table 1.

Categories of Voter Decisions of Rural Utah School Boards

From Selected Meeting Minutes January 1972 - December 1992		
Category of Decision	Frequency	Percentage of Total
1. Finance	2181	41.54%
2. Personnel	1231	23.45%
3. Permissions	445	8.48%
4. Regarding Presentations to Board	91	1.73%
5. Regarding Students	337	6.42%
6. Executive Session	243	4.63%
7. Awards/Recognitions	107	2.04%
8. Policy Development/Oversight	438	8.34%
9. Textbooks/Curriculum	92	1.75%
10. Legal Issues	85	1.62%
Total	5250	100.00%

Conclusions and Recommendations

These results suggest that the rural boards studied tend to micromanage their districts, generally ignoring the larger leadership function of building consensus and fostering a sense of community. Further, these rural Utah boards appear to follow the tendency of mid west boards (Krepel & Grady, 1992) to place low priority upon discussions of state and national reform movements and upon unstructured discussion with patrons. From these observations we suggest the following recommendations for increasing the efficiency of rural school board governance.

We recommend that rural school boards avoid the trap of micromanaging district affairs. Boards generally view themselves as either representing the district to the patrons, or as representing the patron, to the district (Lutz & Gresson, 1980). This technical v. political orientation of boards leads to different governance styles (Greene, 1992). But the best efforts of either style are quickly crushed by the weight of administrative detail. Attention to the details of school governance is, of course, essential to board function, but when boards focus meetings and discussions almost exclusively upon budget and personnel, everyone else in the community focuses upon these issues as well (Schlechy, 1992). Vision blurs, and leadership opportunities are lost.

Modern technology now enables most rural districts to transfer details of finance and some aspects of personnel management to an outside agency or consulting firm. Drawing on such community resources is not an easy step for board members, as they remain ultimately responsible for decisions and implementation (Hollander & Offermann, 1990). Public discussion and professional consultation offer pathways for establishing policies and procedures of feedback and accountability. Once such procedures are in place and subject to ongoing review, board members will be free of crushing administrative detail. Less fettered by minutiae, board members will be more free to "look through a wide-angled lens, not a microscope; identify problems and issues, not solutions; determine what should be taught, not how" (Houston, 1994).

Less burdened by micromanaging district affairs, rural boards have a wonderful opportunity to build community by forging links and opening lines of communication with all segments of the community. We believe that boards have a dual responsibility to represent education to the community and to see that the education system responds to community needs and concerns. This kind of leadership requires that boards "represent the best and finest thinking in the community regarding the purposes of education in a democracy" (Schlechy, 1992, p. 28). Secret agendas and privileged information are inappropriate. This leadership must result in honest and ongoing discussion, the free flow of information that constitutes the life blood of living, dynamic organizations (Wheatley, 1992).

Nurturing a community discussion that seeks to involve all interested patrons accomplishes a number of important

functions. Free and open discussion helps board members sort through the flood of information that inundates all managers (Senge, 1990). Community values are illuminated, and needs are clarified. Community ownership is increased as patrons participate in discussions and influence decisions.

Such dialogue increases linkage between the board and the patrons, an important characteristic of successful boards (Zeigler, 1975). Trust and vision are developed and shared, enabling board members to avoid the all-or-nothing swings typical of rural political collaboration (Carlson, 1995). Policies can then be developed to renew the institution, empower those it influences, and meet the leadership expectations of school board patrons (Van Alfen, 1995).

We also recommend that rural boards seek to foster and nurture more discussion of state and national reforms. Rural communities face major social challenges including population flux, aging of the rural populace, isolation, and financial problems (Forbes, 1989). At the same time, rural schools are small and closely connected to the community, two factors that make constructive response possible. Sincere and open discussion among patrons has the potential to generate a consensus that will empower rural boards to implement bottom-up reform, the only kind of school reform likely to succeed.

Finally, we encourage boards and interested researchers to frequently consider the nature of votes in board meetings. Patterns that emerge will reveal trends, such as micromanaging and suggest alterations in the board's use of time and energy.

The future will certainly continue to challenge the best efforts of rural school boards. By frequently considering the record of what boards actually do and by appropriately clearing the slate of administrative detail, rural boards may yet achieve the education goal cherished since colonial times: the building of sincere and lasting support for the work of the community schools.

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