How School Board Members' Beliefs About State Education Policymaking and Policymakers Impact the Opportunity Gap in the Age of COVID-19

Introduction

The role of school boards today is increasingly complex. Calls for change have become routine for leaders in US K-12 public schools, often the result of value preferences internal or external to the organization, including those generated by federal and state actors (Land, 2002; Kirst, 2004; Cuban, 2004; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008; Henig, 2009; Schueler, 2019; Welsh, 2019) There is considerable scholarly debate over the role and effectiveness of democratically elected school boards in performing an accountability function (Shober, & Hartney, 2014; Ford & Ihrke, 2015; Sampson, 2019). The accumulation of federal, state, and local policies and programs, historically enacted as an equity response for the public good, have been built upon the inheritance of past reform, leaving school boards to implement reform efforts within a system that's primarily responsible for the necessity of the reform in the first place (Fusarelli & Young, 2011; Cohen, Spillane, & Peurach, 2018). Emerging evidence demonstrates that school boards may have an influence on student outcomes and play a key role in creating and sustaining the conditions that support it, after a century of hands-off governance related to instructional decisions, leaving that element to the education professionals (Lashway, 2002; Delagardelle, 2008; Frankenberg & Diem, 2013; Johnson, 2013; Plough, 2014; Alsbury & Gore, 2015). Yet, school boards are not always in control of their schools. They may have less authority to make decisions while being held increasingly accountable for student outcomes (Mountford, 2008; Plough, 2014).

Research has primarily focused on the relationship between school board members' attitudes, beliefs, and actions and student achievement outcomes, typically after policies are codified by state or federal policy actors and operationalized by the superintendent. Less is known about school boards' understanding of and proactive engagement with state education policymaking processes. The purpose of this study is to address the opportunity gap by examining the beliefs of local school boards to determine how they influence access, implementation, and distribution of resources to limited-resourced communities for underserved students.

To center social justice, school leaders must look beyond the state policy's institutionalized structure (Mavrogordato & White, 2020, p. 31). Current policy contexts in California are ideal for studying school boards' engagement and involvement with education policy at the state level. This research will examine school board members' beliefs about and engagement in state education policymaking processes within this context of increasing involvement of state actors in education policymaking and how it has exacerbated the opportunity gap, particularly in light of COVID-19. As elected officials, school board members possess the positional authority to advocate for policies that promote equity in limited resourced communities. This study will identify characteristics of school board members that scholars have observed "are more anecdotal than empirical" (Hess, 2002; Land 2002; Delagardelle, 2008, Alsbury 2008; Johnson, 2011; Ford & Ihrke, 2016; Holman, 2017; Kenney, 2020) as it relates to effectively preparing school board members to engage in the policymaking process that improves outcomes for underserved students.

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Positionality Statement

The co-PI's are practitioners and scholars. One is a school superintendent for an urban public school district who also teaches educational leadership courses at a local university. The other was a teacher, and school and district administrator in a diverse public school district before transitioning to the university as an assistant professor. The combination of these experiences uniquely position them to conduct this study. As researchers, they are grounded in constructivism and see the application of this theory to the research. Policy actors actively create knowledge based on their experiences. The researchers believe this may relate to school board members who may not view themselves as policy informants capable of impacting policy.

Research Questions

(RQ1): What sources of information (e.g., formal v. informal) influence school board members?

(RQ2): How do contextual, institutional, and individual factors influence school board members' education policy and decision-making processes?

(RQ3): How do school board members describe the forms of policy advocacy they are engaged in (e.g., develop legislative platforms, attend a legislative day at the capitol, communicate with legislators and/or staff) to address the opportunity gap in underserved communities in California?

Relevant Literature

Through most of the 20th Century, school systems had few environmental pressures to improve student outcomes. This parallelism between organizations and their environment was attributed to a logic of confidence and good faith, a term sociologists John W. Meyer and Brian Rowan used to describe the phenomenon of internal participants and external constituents cooperating in the practices of avoidance, discretion, and overlooking (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 357). The logic of confidence led to a loss of confidence, expressed in state and federal encroachment, and an interest in creating alternative markets and subsequently choice. Like the institutions they govern, calls for school board reform to meet the demands of a postmodern education establishment resonated in board rooms (Cohen, Spillane and Peurach, 2017; Land, 2002; Danzberger, 1994; Danzberger & Usdan,1992; Kirst, 1994; NSBF, 1999; Fund, 1992).

What has since emerged as a loosening of the tightly coupled system institutionalized during the NCLB (2001) era, resulting in local policymakers implementing state and federal policy as partners in reform (Mavrogordato & White, 2017, Callahan & Shifrer, 2016; Coburn, 2005), carrying out states' constitutional guarantees of public education (Diem, Frankenberg, & Cleary, 2015).

Despite school boards competing with various political actors and their interests at the local, state, and federal levels, they have an enormous impact on public education and influence student achievement (Plough, 2014; Diem, Frankenberg, & Cleary, 2015). Yet, little attention has been paid to school district governance (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004).

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Research substantiating the link between school board governance and narrowing the opportunity gap is minimal (Land, 2002; Delagardelle, 2008).

Conceptual Framework

Practically all social and political institutions have roots in localism (Evans, Marsh, and Stoker, 2013). State and federal policymakers' encroachment has increasingly threatened local control as state and federal policymakers have advanced educational policies, including the gubernatorial influence (Kirst, 2004). However, while today's school board members compete with various political actors and their interests, school boards significantly impact public education, shaping policies that have consequences in marginalized communities (Diem, Frankenberg, and Cleary, 2015). Furthermore, research suggests that political actors value education leaders' voices when making education policy (White, 2018).

Drawing upon Crowson & Goldring's (2009) framework of new localism, this study proposes clarifying school board members' roles related to policymaking and policymakers in the current climate of pandemic schooling. Specifically, school boards are held responsible for facilitating prescriptive policies about school reopening and learning loss mitigation in underserved communities. While school boards shape top-down policy through bottom-up pathways to meet reform requirements (Barrett-Tatum & Ashworth, 2020), historically, they have not done so successfully when measured for equity (Bishop & Noguera, 2019). This study is viewed through school boards' lens as policy informants capable of impacting policy, not merely facilitating its implementation. We build upon this integrated framework to better understand how school board members perceive and engage in state education policymaking processes (White, 2019).

Data and Methods

This study employs a mixed methods research design. The researchers will use focus groups and a survey followed by interviews. Data will focus on the complex questions, considering both board member behaviors and what they perceive as important in influencing policy and policy decision-making. The study's questions focus on sources of information board members use, contextual issues at multiple levels, and forms of policy advocacy they engage into service underserved communities.

Procedures

In initiating the study, former school board members from the two counties will be asked to participate in an exploratory focus group. This pilot session will allow researchers to gain deeper insights into the role and level of board members' engagement in policy issues and refine the survey questions. Following the focus group, 270 sitting board of trustee members in two counties will be surveyed. The survey will use Qualtrics and be emailed to participants. Participants will receive at least two reminders before closing the data collection time period of two weeks. After survey data is analyzed, a random sampling of board members, who volunteer to be interviewed through the survey process, will be invited to participate in an interview with researchers to delve deeper into the how and why of context, policy resources and usage, and responsiveness to under-resourced communities.

Instruments

The focus group protocol includes eight questions inquiring where they access information on policy and advocacy to ensure preparedness for board activities. Questions will include perceptions of their role as board members serving underserved communities, decision-making regarding policy, and what role the community plays in these decisions. Participants will have an opportunity to discuss their role as a policy advocate.

Survey questions will have both closed-ended and open-ended prompts that allow participants to share what they do to learn and engage in policy and policy decision-making as a board member. Demographics regarding age, gender, ethnicity, length of time in the role, level of preparedness, and educational level will be recorded. Participants will be asked questions regarding their connection and level of engagement with the communities they serve. Questions emphasizing access to and onboarding resources, informal and formal, will be included. Most questions will be Likert scale and forced choice. Some open-ended questions will allow participants to describe what they need, how they are challenged, and what could be done to improve their level of engagement relative to policy.

Data Analysis

Focus group data will be analyzed through open coding and identification of emergent themes to develop survey questions. Survey data will be analyzed for frequency of responses and crosstabulations of outcomes by gender and ethnicity and other demographic variables such as length of time in role and onboarding opportunities. Correlations, where appropriate, will be run to determine relationships. Finally, interview data will be analyzed through semi-closed coding guided by the preliminary analyses of focus group and survey data. Both convergent and divergent themes will be identified specific to the policy and policy decision-making and advocacy issues that emerge from data analyses.

Conclusion

The impact of pandemic schooling has positioned school boards to advocate and leverage support and resources to inform and influence state education policy targeting the opportunity gap. This study aims to assess school board members' engagement levels with education policy and determine individual, institutional and contextual factors that shape school board members' beliefs about state-level education policymaking processes and policymakers. This study's results could provide insights into how school boards serving underrepresented students mobilize to effectively advance their policy goals and exercise their power as policymaking and policy-influencing bodies. Furthermore, results could inform ongoing broad member training programs about influencing state education policy targeting the opportunity gap by professional associations such as the California School Boards Association and the National School Boards Association.

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Project Personnel

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Protocol Questions

1. Please introduce yourself, share how long you have been a school board member, what motivated you to become a school board member, and a bit of what you do outside of your work as a school board member.

2. We are very interested in hearing about where and how you access information to do your work as a school board member.

    a. What channels of communication in your school board role provide you with information that influences your beliefs about policies and policymakers?
    b. Please describe how you access information that prepares you for the types of decisions you are required to make as a school board member.
    c. What sources of media have been influential sources of information for you around policies and policymakers?
    d. Are there professional associations, trainings, or specific websites you access to support you in this role?

3. As a school board member, you are hearing from and trying to be responsive to many different constituencies such as community members, school district administrators, educators, parents, students, business owners, and more. I want to dig into the role each of those groups or individuals plays in your decision-making process. So, to start, what role does the community play in your policy decision-making process?"
    a. school district administrators
    b. educators
    c. parents
    d. students
    e. business owners
    f. others

4. How do your primary values and personal experiences influence your education policy priorities and policy decision-making processes?

5. I would now like to shift and talk a bit about how you engage in advocacy as a school board member. Before I get to those questions, I'd like to ask you: what does it mean to you to be engaged in policy advocacy?

    a. Could you give a few specific examples of ways in which you engage in policy advocacy? I am especially interested in advocacy specific to issues affecting underserved communities in California.
    b. How often do you engage in policy advocacy?
    c. With whom do you engage in policy advocacy?
    d. Are there ways you have not yet engaged in advocacy, but you'd like to engage in policy advocacy as a school board member?

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6. Describe a challenge or challenging experience while engaging in advocacy work as a school board member. (EX: distractions, limited knowledge, bureaucracy, routine or mundane work).

7. Given what you know about onboarding strategies for school board members, what resources would equip school board members to support underserved communities? (Resources: training, materials, etc.…)

8. Is there anything else you want to share?

9. If no response to 8…..ask, "Are there any questions I should have asked….."