

*Report on K-12 Governance*

**Strengthening the  
Work of School Boards  
in Pennsylvania**

**The Education Policy and Leadership Center**

*March 2004*

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## Foreword

More than a decade of standards-based reforms have altered almost every aspect of education policy in the United States, including Pennsylvania, but have largely ignored the continuing role of local policymakers. Although state and national policymakers have dictated more and more of the K-12 public education agenda, The Education Policy and Leadership Center (EPLC) believes it is imperative to consider how to strengthen the work of school boards that will continue to play a vital role in the operation of the public education system.

EPLC began a study of school district governance in July 2003 in an effort to address two issues: improving the effectiveness of school boards and increasing the number of citizens who are motivated and prepared to serve on boards. This report reaffirms the importance of elected boards as trustees of the public school system and representatives of their communities, while serving as public officials established and delegated significant duties by state government. They increasingly are the intermediary between a school system with its resource needs and a public that sometimes does not fully appreciate its duty to educate all of its children. These roles appear to conflict from time to time, challenging each school director to be informed, thoughtful, and dedicated to the effectiveness of the school system and the interests of the children it is intended to serve.

This report is not intended to indict school boards or those who serve on them. The 4,500 men and women who serve Pennsylvania and their communities today, and their predecessors, are with very few exceptions owed the collective gratitude of all citizens of the Commonwealth. School directors take on extraordinary responsibilities as unpaid volunteer public servants. Nonetheless, improvements are possible and some changes in law and practice are in order.

It should be emphasized that the changes we suggest are not driven by the occasional media stories that focus on the behavior of an ineffective board or director. Instead, they are compelled by the changing demands placed upon the public school system and all those who are asked to respond to those demands as school leaders. It is in this environment that the work of school boards is more challenging and more important than ever before. It is in this environment, therefore, that it is more critical than ever that the men and women who serve on boards be well-prepared, individually and collectively, and appropriately supported by statute and by community to fulfill the duties of this public service.

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The objectives of the EPLC study and this report are to improve the effectiveness of school boards in Pennsylvania and increase the number of citizens who are motivated and prepared to serve on school boards. This report offers several recommendations that we believe are worthy of adoption and that should provoke serious discussion.

- School boards will be more effective if board and superintendent responsibilities are more clearly delineated in state law. In brief, boards should be focused on student achievement and exercise their authority through planning, policymaking, monitoring, communicating, and advocating. Superintendents should act and be treated as chief executives and educational leaders of their districts.
- Boards will be more effective if their members are required to have some formal orientation to their work before assuming office.
- Boards will be more effective if their members are required to participate in continuing professional development once seated.
- In order to counter the detrimental effects of rapid turnover of board majorities, terms of office for board members should be increased to six years, with one-third of the members elected every two years.
- State and local officials and other community leaders, including employers, should publicly acknowledge the importance of school board service, encourage more citizens to consider service on school boards and related school district activities, and promote greater citizen awareness of the activities and views of school boards, board members, and candidates.
- All citizens — as voters, parents, district employees, and neighbors of board members — should support the role of school board members as policymakers for their respective districts, and not expect or encourage any board member to be involved in the day-to-day management of the operation of the district.

Clearly, each of us has some responsibility if we are to improve the work of school boards. EPLC stands ready to promote discussion about these recommendations and to assist in their implementation.

*Ronald Cowell*

*President, The Education Policy and Leadership Center*

*March 2004*

## Part I • The K-12 Governance Project

The K-12 Governance Project of The Education Policy and Leadership Center (EPLC) is intended to develop and implement recommendations that will support two primary objectives: to improve the effectiveness of school boards and to increase the number of citizens who are motivated and prepared to serve on local school boards. This report includes recommendations for state policymakers, school boards, superintendents, voters and community leaders to consider in order to accomplish these two objectives.

To assist EPLC in identifying and considering key issues and recommendations for policymaker and public action, EPLC appointed a 20-member study group (see Appendix A for a list of members) including representatives of school boards, school administrators, school study councils, parents, higher education, and the business community. Collectively, members have 92 years of experience as board members and 51 as superintendents. The study group held an introductory conference call in July 2003, met in Harrisburg for two days each in September and December 2003, and for one day in January 2004, and held a concluding conference call in February 2004. While the study group was instrumental in preparing this report, it is not intended to be a consensus document that necessarily represents in all respects the views of all its members. The report ultimately is EPLC's product, for which it bears responsibility.

In addition to working with the study group, EPLC conducted two focus group meetings to address specifically the roles and responsibilities of boards and superintendents in leading districts and ways to improve state policy to promote more effective governance relationships. One was in Hershey on October 24, 2003; the second was in Pittsburgh on December 17, 2003.

EPLC also conducted a web-based survey of superintendents and school boards from November 2003 to January 2004 to gather a broader cross-section of views on appropriate superintendent and school board roles, the relationships between boards and superintendents, and the characteristics of effective boards (see Appendix C for the survey instrument). A total of 286 responded to the survey (a response rate of 29 percent among superintendents and board presidents), with most of the responses coming from superintendents.

The conclusions and recommendations of this report concerning K-12 governance in Pennsylvania also have been informed by the important work of other individuals and state and national organizations that have considered similar governance and leadership issues, and the on-going policy and leadership development activities of EPLC.

At a time when much critical policymaking is occurring in state capitols and in Washington, local boards in Pennsylvania and elsewhere defend against a completely homogenized education system.

## Part II • The Changing Role of School Boards

Effective governance is a necessary ingredient for a successful public school system. A 1999 report of the Education Commission of the States said, “Without good governance, good schools are the exception, not the rule.”<sup>1</sup>

To some, the effects of school governance may seem unimportant, since the key to student achievement is the interaction between student and teacher in the classroom.

But that interaction takes place in a context highly susceptible to “innumerable large and small decisions” of educational governance.<sup>2</sup>

As public and state policymaker expectations for public education have become more demanding in the relatively new era of state initiated standards-based reforms and the federal enactment of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law, it is not surprising that expectations for the work of school boards also would evolve.

American public education has been on a reform trajectory ever since the issuance of the 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*. For more than a decade state after state has followed a similar standards-based reform path. Virtually every state (including Pennsylvania) now has adopted academic standards specifying what policymakers expect students to know and be able to do as a result of their K-12 education experience, along with state assessments that are increasingly aligned with those standards. Most states (again including Pennsylvania) have increased the requirements for becoming a teacher and remaining in the classroom. And a majority of states (including Pennsylvania) have adopted accountability systems that provide for increasing degrees of state intervention in districts where students are failing to achieve the standards. The interconnectedness of these reform strategies reflects an understanding on the part of policymakers that systemic change is needed to refocus the education system on higher levels of achievement for all students.

Those state adopted reforms are now reflected in and largely required by the federal No Child Left Behind Act. But as states and now the federal government have increased the reach and specificity of their policymaking during the past decade, and while they have been more systemic than at any previous point in history in overhauling education policy, local school governance has been largely ignored by these reforms. Few states have examined the role of local school district governance in this era of standards-based education policy and increased state and federal decision-making. Pennsylvania certainly has not. It is time to do so.

The significant roles of school boards that influence the recommendations of the report are those as:

- Representatives of the local community;
- Agents of state government;
- Trustees for an education system that exists to serve the needs of children; and
- Intermediaries between school district and community.

*A most fundamental purpose of local school boards — in the past and today — is to represent the community and its values in the governance of public education.* Phillip Boyle, a University of North Carolina expert on public problem solving and decision making, says the purpose of any legitimate government is to help citizens realize a good life for themselves, their families, and communities by defining and securing public values such as liberty, equality, community, and prosperity. This is particularly important in the governance of public schools, which are responsible for creating an educated citizenry capable of self-government, and for providing equal opportunity, democratizing social experiences, and building the capacity for self-sufficiency and contributions to society's general welfare. What is public about public education is the transmission of these democratic values to all members of the next generation.<sup>3</sup>

School board members are grassroots democratic representatives of the people who live closest to the children our schools are established to serve. They are preservers of the nation's historic commitment to schools that reflect the needs and values of each community. At a time when much critical policymaking is occurring in state capitols and in Washington, local boards in Pennsylvania and elsewhere defend against a completely homogenized education system.

Related to this “representative” role of school boards is the function they serve as elected taxing bodies with responsibility to raise a considerable portion of every district's budget. This, too, is both a traditional and continuing role.

*School boards also act as agents of state government.* School districts and their boards are created by state government to help fulfill a state constitutional mandate that the General Assembly provide for a system of public schools. Districts and boards exist in large part because the General Assembly and the general public have valued a substantial measure of local control in the governance of the public school system.

The board role as an agent of state government is prescribed in some detail in Commonwealth statutes, especially the School Code. For instance, language in the School Code prescribes a long list of decisions pertinent to the operation of the school district that must be determined by a majority vote of the school board. Other state

laws establish requirements for the school board relative to how it conducts public business, including requirements for public access to meetings and information, and a prescribed process and timetable for the consideration of an annual budget.

In the new era of standards-based reforms and NCLB, school districts and their boards have additional responsibilities for which they will be held accountable. The expectations of state and federal policymakers are becoming much more precise and rigorous, and boards are ultimately responsible for the accomplishment of these greater expectations. Some of these expectations are about inputs (i.e. “highly qualified teachers”) and process (i.e. public reporting), but they are most importantly about improvement in student academic performance (i.e. “adequate yearly progress” and all students demonstrating academic proficiencies). This is a responsibility for school boards that, on the one hand, is not new but, on the other hand, is more demanding and subject to more public scrutiny and state government oversight than ever before.

*School boards are trustees for a public education system in Pennsylvania that increasingly is acknowledged to be pivotal to the well-being of the Commonwealth, its communities, and all of its citizens.* Statewide and in hundreds of individual communities, this institution has a legacy of more than 200 years, and a responsibility for service to children that will extend to many future generations. In each of 501 school communities in Pennsylvania, it is the school board that is entrusted to preserve and to strengthen the educational system, which is in fact or potentially a community’s greatest asset.

School boards raise substantial tax revenues to sustain this system and are empowered by the General Assembly to make significant decisions about the use of public funds from local, state and federal sources. The impact of effective public educational programs on the lives of individual children is significant.

As trustees, school boards have a responsibility to ensure the strength of the system of public schools and its effectiveness in educating all of the children in the communities they serve. The adequacy and effective and equitable distribution of the resources of the educational system to enable every child to achieve is increasingly a challenge for boards in an environment where the expectations for student achievement are higher than ever, the needs of students are more diverse than ever, and the competition for scarce public funds is increasingly intense.

*School boards also act as intermediaries between the schools and the community.* This role, which might also be characterized as community leadership, is also the role of bridge-builder between the roles of the board as representative, state agent, and trustee. This role as intermediary and community leader will grow in significance.

School boards need to be leaders in their communities to build understanding and support for an education system that is changing. The past two decades of school reform aimed at improving academic achievement for all students have increased the public's expectations of the schools. "Added to the traditional goals of broader access to schools and increased attendance is the belief that all students can and should be expected to achieve at high levels."<sup>4</sup>

This increased public expectation has now become the law of the land and is the centerpiece of the federal No Child Left Behind Act. Never before in American history has the federal government exercised influence over all public schools in all communities with respect to the learning of all students. Previously, the federal role was more circumscribed, overseeing programs partially funded by Washington for specific groups of children — those with disabilities or those who are economically disadvantaged, for example. But NCLB requires annual testing of all students in all grades three through eight, public reporting of test results, alternative placement options for students in schools with poor performance, and increased requirements for teacher qualifications. Local districts are accountable for student performance on tests that are designed by states to meet federal requirements.

These requirements for compliance with No Child Left Behind follow several years of increased state authority over the core functions of schools as a result of the development of state standards and assessments and high school graduation requirements for students and the requirements for increased teacher qualifications enacted in Pennsylvania and by most states since the late 1980s.

The focus on student achievement, the commitment to every student, the attention to disaggregated data, an understanding of accountability measures and consequences, and the readiness to appropriately re-allocate resources require boards and communities to make and support difficult decisions. The National School Boards Association puts it succinctly: "Improving student achievement through community engagement is the Key Work of School Boards."<sup>5</sup>

As parents with school-age children have become a smaller part of most communities, boards more often than children are the direct link between households and schools. It is the board that has a major duty to explain to the community the needs of the school system for which the board is trustee, even as board members serve also as representatives of the community, reflecting the needs and values of the community to the school system. In this intermediary role, a board's success as trustee to provide

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sufficient resources to meet the educational needs of children will be very dependent on its effective leadership to build community support for those necessary resources.

Although promulgated in Washington or more likely Harrisburg, key education policies about student standards, assessments and consequences are implemented in districts and schools and therefore are likely to be debated with school board members rather than members of the state legislature or Congress. In these community debates, even as board members serve to *represent* the values in a community, they also have an opportunity and responsibility to *help shape* the values of the community. In many instances, they will be required to build community attention and commitment to issues that long have been ignored.

The roles of intermediary and community leader will only increase in significance and challenge as an effective public education system is increasingly articulated as a state and national public interest, even while intentions are stated to preserve a meaningful measure of local community values. Communities will require very effective school boards to successfully reconcile these sometime competing views. It is not an overstatement to suggest that the future of “local control” of public education is indeed in the hands of school board members and will be very much influenced by the ability of boards to successfully serve these various roles.

An additional observation about “student achievement” is required. While the federal No Child Left Behind law and many state policies pertaining to assessment and accountability measure the success of schools relative to student achievement through assessments in only a few academic subject areas, student achievement in successful schools must mean much more.

The student achievement that must be the subject of school board and public attention is not only about doing well on state tests related to three or four academic subjects. The suggestions of the K-12 Governance Study Group emphasize that student achievement needs to include much more to reflect what most citizens in most communities want for their schools and their children. This accords with work on school governance issues during the past several years by the New England School Development Council (NESDEC), which said in 2000 that “student achievement” must include academic attainment beyond state standards, job skills and preparation for work, citizenship, appreciation of the arts, development of character and values (e.g., integrity, responsibility, courtesy, patriotism, and work ethic), sound physical development and good health, and valuing the growing diversity of American society.<sup>6</sup> School boards will play a vital role in ensuring that student achievement in their respective districts reflects this much broader and more appropriate description.

## The Development of School Boards

Today's locally elected school boards evolved from the earliest forms of education governance in this country, beginning more than two centuries ago with the selectmen elected in Massachusetts towns and then with the school committees that were designed to separate education from general purpose governance. Today there are about 15,000 school boards in the United States with a total of approximately 95,000 members.<sup>7</sup>

In Pennsylvania, the Free School Act of 1834 required each municipality to elect a school board. In 1963, the General Assembly adopted a school district reorganization act to reduce the number of districts from what was at the time more than 2,000. By the time reorganization and a court-ordered merger of five districts (to reduce racial segregation) were implemented, Pennsylvania had 501 districts — as it does today. Each district had an elected board, except those in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh; since 1976, the Pittsburgh board also has been elected.

Today, each of the 501 districts is governed by an elected nine-member board except in these situations of persistent academic failure or financial distress:

- A five-member School Reform Commission jointly appointed by the Governor and the Mayor governs the Philadelphia School District. The Reform Commission replaced an appointed board.
- A five-member Board of Control appointed by the Mayor governs the Harrisburg School District.
- A three-member Board of Control appointed by the Secretary of Education governs the Chester Upland School District.
- A three-member fiscal Board of Control appointed by the Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas governs the Duquesne School District.

There are still elected boards in Harrisburg, Chester-Upland, and Duquesne, but their only authority is to levy taxes to support the budgets adopted by their boards of control.

While there are exceptions, the prevailing model of local school governance around the country consists of a small (5-9 members) elected policymaking school board comprised of lay citizens with a professional superintendent chosen by the board to serve as the district's chief executive officer.<sup>8</sup>

## Part III • Responsibilities of Boards and Superintendents

For more than a decade, state and national policymakers have worked with substantial consistency to align state standards, assessments, teacher qualifications, and accountability systems with the fundamental purpose of the public school system, which is to promote student achievement. As school districts have become more complex organizations, and as they have had to respond to increasing pressures from outside their communities, they have had to develop greater administrative capacity and expertise. As a result, many experts on school governance see a need to delineate more clearly governance or policymaking from the delivery of education and implementation of policy.<sup>9</sup> Now it is time to reform the local governance of the system to promote this focus on the centrality of student achievement.

Central to these reforms is consideration of the most appropriate responsibilities of boards and superintendents in this era of standards-based reforms and heightened expectations for the achievement of all students.

School boards should be responsible for planning, policymaking, monitoring, communicating, and advocating, and for hiring the superintendent to whom they should delegate responsibility for the day-to-day management of schools. State law should be revised to reflect these responsibilities.

- *Planning* — adopt a strategic plan with vision, mission, values, priority goals, strategies, educational standards, and methods of assessing progress; periodically review the strategic plan; adopt an annual budget aligned with priority goals; and adopt professional development plans linked to priority goals.
- *Policymaking* — adopt and periodically review policies: (a) to guide the board's own operation; (b) to set expectations for the district's educational and operational functions; and (c) to describe the relationship between the board and superintendent as the district's leadership team.
- *Monitoring* — annually evaluate the superintendent based upon objective criteria; adopt multiple measures of student achievement based on staff recommendations and regularly review progress reports; establish criteria for evaluating progress toward priority goals and regularly review reports of that progress; maintain fiscal oversight of the district; and monitor its own performance through goal setting and periodic self-assessment.
- *Communicating* — maintain open and honest communications among all board members and the superintendent; establish and honor procedures for public and staff input into policymaking; establish procedures for regular reporting to parents and the public about student achievement and district priority goals; reach out to

the community to seek input on community needs and to seek support for district efforts.

- *Advocating* — serve as advocates for all children and youth in the community; and communicate with other local, state, and national policymakers about the needs of children and the schools.

As the professional experts hired by school boards, superintendents should be responsible for serving as CEOs of their districts, leading and managing their operations to promote student achievement, and state law should be revised to reflect these responsibilities. Specifically, superintendents should be responsible for:

- Serving as the district’s CEO, providing leadership and organizational management, and being held accountable by the board for district performance.
- Implementing board policy, providing all board members with information to support their policymaking, and making recommendations for policy changes and new policies.
- Establishing the organizational structure and school programs to help all students succeed.
- Providing leadership in the development and periodic review of the strategic plan and district priority goals.
- Recommending to the board the hiring of all district personnel; supervising and evaluating personnel; recommending professional development plans to the board; and, if necessary, recommending all dismissals of personnel to the board.
- Recommending the annual budget and overseeing its implementation once adopted by the board.
- Maintaining positive relationships with community stakeholders and developing partnerships with other community providers of services for children.
- Practicing and institutionalizing the concept of continuous improvement.
- Serving as a public advocate for the district and the children and youth living in the community.

It is important to avoid viewing these as separate and unrelated lists of responsibilities. For example, the board should adopt the annual budget and the taxes to support it, but it should base that budget upon the superintendent’s recommendations. Similarly, the board should hire personnel and adopt the measures of student assessment, but

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should do so based upon the superintendent’s recommendations. Many experts cite teamwork between the board and its superintendent as the key ingredient in effective school governance.<sup>10</sup>

The current state law in Pennsylvania providing for the responsibilities of the school board and the superintendent does not reflect this delineation of responsibilities. Most of the language concerning the respective responsibilities of school board and superintendent reflect circumstances more than 50 years ago when many Pennsylvania school districts were managed by their school boards since there was little management expertise among the professional staff, which generally consisted of teachers, principals, and “supervising principals.”

Today, every school district has a professionally trained school superintendent, and many have one or more assistant superintendents. Almost all have professionally trained business administrators, along with other professionals with expertise in areas ranging from curriculum to professional development to transportation to facilities management. As a result of the growth of this professional management expertise in education, school boards generally have evolved into policymaking bodies that delegate administrative responsibility to superintendents and their staff.<sup>11</sup>

A major criticism of the school governance structure is aimed at those districts that have not evolved in this way — districts in which boards engage in what often is referred to as micromanagement of the schools.<sup>12</sup> In its landmark 1992 study of school governance, The Twentieth Century Fund said a major obstacle to school boards serving as leaders of education improvement was their tendency “to micromanage, to become immersed in the day-to-day administration of their districts that is properly the realm of the professional administrator.”<sup>13</sup>

Focusing school boards on policymaking and oversight and delegating administrative responsibilities to superintendents and staff are at the core of most recent studies — including those by The Twentieth Century Fund, the Institute for Educational Leadership, and the Education Commission of the States — recommending school governance improvements.<sup>14</sup>

Pennsylvania state law does not clearly set forth these responsibilities and arguably fails to recognize the appropriate roles of boards and administrators. Those sections of state law that purport to lay out board and superintendent responsibilities should do so in a comprehensive way and should focus the board and the administration on their key

functions. However, Section 1081 of the School Code, titled “Duties of Superintendents,” gives scant attention to those responsibilities, spelling out only two:

- He or she acts as an instructional leader, visiting the schools, observing instruction, giving direction on teaching methods, and reporting any problems to the school board.
- He or she interacts with the board by carrying out “such other duties as may be required by the board” and by having a seat on the board and “the right to speak on all matters before the board but not to vote.”

Many school boards rely on the “other duties” language to delegate both day-to-day management and long-range planning responsibilities to their superintendents. And many superintendents use the “right to speak on all matters” to provide leadership to the board on virtually all elements of school district governance. But the School Code certainly is not clear that this is the intended school board-superintendent relationship.

On the other hand, Article V of the School Code, titled “Duties and Powers of Boards of School Directors,” gives school boards authority over virtually all areas of educational governance and management:

- Adopting policies to manage the district.
- Establishing schools and programs.
- Determining the school calendar.
- Adopting the curriculum.
- Adopting textbooks.
- Appointing and dismissing the superintendent.
- Appointing and dismissing all other professional staff.
- Adopting an annual budget.
- Levying and collecting taxes.
- Borrowing money.
- Determining depositories for school funds.
- Entering into contracts.
- Determining salaries of all personnel.
- Purchasing and selling land.
- Determining the location of school buildings.
- Operating school cafeterias.

- Organizing school safety patrols.
- Adopting policies to govern student organizations.
- Authorizing staff participation in professional conferences.
- Authorizing student field trips.

While some of these assignments to school boards represent local policymaking or the exercise of fiduciary responsibility by elected officials, others are administrative duties that ought to be performed by superintendents and staff. In addition, the School Code is unclear about the relationship between the superintendent in developing recommendations and the board in reviewing and adopting them. For example, the Code makes no mention of the superintendent being responsible for presenting a proposed budget or recommending individuals for employment.

This lack of clarity frequently contributes to dysfunctional district governance, detracts from the board's focus on student achievement, interferes with the superintendent's ability to staff and manage the schools effectively, confuses the public about who is accountable for what, and in some cases even leads to verbal and physical abuse among members of what should be school district leadership teams.<sup>15</sup>

Laws in other states do better define the relationship between the overall governance responsibilities of school boards and the leadership and management duties of administrators. While states are different in many respects, and we do not suggest simply adopting anyone else's governance model, some statutes do include interesting approaches.

The Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 clearly designates the board as a policymaking body and the superintendent as the CEO to manage the district. Boards establish goals, policies, and budgets and select, work with, and evaluate their superintendents. The superintendent is the only person actually employed and evaluated by the board. The superintendent hires, supervises, and, if necessary, dismisses principals. Principals, in turn, select school staff with the approval of the superintendent.

Kentucky and Tennessee have similar laws, focusing the work of boards on policymaking and budget adoption, and assigning management responsibility, including the responsibility for hiring and managing personnel, to superintendents.

West Virginia enacted revisions to its law in 2003 that clarify the role of the board in policymaking, contracting with and annually evaluating both the superintendent's and its own performance, serving as a link to local school improvement councils, providing for community involvement in decision making, developing long-range plans using data on school performance, levying taxes, and employing only those personnel nominated

by the superintendent. The law specifies that the superintendent's duties include providing instructional leadership, managing personnel, giving the board information needed to make policy decisions, and ensuring that state requirements are met.

There is not very much scientific research that draws direct connections between governance models and student achievement, but the studies that do exist and the observations of numerous experts on school governance are remarkably uniform in their recommendations.<sup>16</sup> Effective boards focus on overarching issues of student achievement, policy development, and resource allocation to support implementation of district policies that promote achievement. They use data and other information to make decisions and evaluate the implementation of those decisions. They avoid day-to-day management of schools that is properly the role of the superintendent.

Many observers of school governance point out that the single most important duty of a school board is to recruit, hire, support, and evaluate the superintendent.<sup>17</sup> He or she, in turn, is responsible for providing educational leadership and serving as the district's chief executive officer. In those roles, the superintendent must provide the board with the information it needs to make sound policy decisions, recommend policy to the board, implement the board's decisions, and manage the schools, including personnel and programs. These responsibilities are intertwined and mutually supportive, and effective districts have governance teams that consist of the board and the superintendent working together. If the superintendent respects the board's role as a governing body, he or she will help board members become part of the district leadership team and involve them in major policy decisions. Superintendents who do not respect the board's governance role typically attempt to circumvent the board. Boards that trust their superintendents (and individual board members who do) support the superintendent's management of the district and avoid the temptation to tell teachers how to teach or to change bus stops. Boards that do not trust their superintendents tend to micromanage their districts.<sup>18</sup>

The observations of experts are reflected also in the responses to EPLC's superintendent-school board survey and the focus group discussions. Survey respondents said the most important characteristics of effective boards are collaboration with the superintendent and management team (89 percent very important), mutual respect and respect for others in the district (89 percent), open communications (80 percent), an effective decision-making process (68 percent), and informed discussion of issues (65 percent).

Effective boards focus on overarching issues of student achievement, policy development, and resource allocation to support implementation of district policies that promote achievement.

They also said school boards should have primary responsibility for establishing district policy, establishing district goals, and maintaining fiscal oversight. Superintendents, on the other hand, should have primary responsibility for developing a strategic plan for board adoption, proposing the annual budget, hiring and evaluating personnel, establishing student learning goals, determining programs to meet district goals, determining how to assess student progress, and communicating with staff. Respondents were nearly evenly divided on whether the board or superintendent should have primary responsibility for communicating with the public.

Several recommendations of this report suggest the need for the Pennsylvania General Assembly to adopt changes to the School Code to better delineate the respective responsibilities of school boards and superintendents. These suggestions reflect the key suggestions of national experts, recent legislative changes in some other states, and the good practice that already is implemented in many school districts in Pennsylvania.

## Part IV • The Effective School Board Member

While board members have no authority to act individually on school district matters, each board member must exercise his/her responsibilities as a member of the school district's policymaking body. And each member must be prepared to effectively and simultaneously fulfill the roles as community representative, state agent, trustee, and intermediary.

Individual board members must value public education and serve as advocates for the children in their communities. Board members must understand their collective authority and responsibility, working collaboratively with each other and the superintendent to achieve school district goals. As links between the schools and the larger community, board members must communicate effectively and respectfully with diverse audiences. As leaders of organizations dedicated to learning, board members must invest time in their own learning. In order to make the best possible decisions, board members need to be open-minded, weighing information and opposing points of view before coming to conclusions. In order to preserve public trust, board members must act ethically in all their relationships — with each other, the superintendent, staff, parents, students, and other citizens. Three actions toward achieving this ideal are orientation for new board members, professional development for all school board members, and the adoption by each board of a code of conduct to guide its members' behavior. This report includes a "Model Code of Conduct" that may be adopted in its suggested form, but that at least should provide a starting point for the discussion and development of a district code agreed to by board members to guide the conduct of board members in their district.

Much of the research on effective boards supports these general characteristics of responsible behavior by individual board members.<sup>19</sup> So do respondents to EPLC's superintendent-school board survey, who indicate that the top characteristics of effective board members are mutual respect and respect for others (91 percent very important), collaboration with the superintendent and management team (85 percent), open-mindedness (82 percent), and open communications (77 percent).

Unfortunately, not all board members reflect these characteristics. Superintendents and experienced board members in EPLC's focus groups repeatedly noted that some board members (particularly newer ones) exhibit a lack of knowledge and understanding of their roles, responsibilities, and the major issues they need to address. School board members in Pennsylvania are not required to participate in any form of professional development, although many do avail themselves voluntarily of programs offered by the Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA) and other organizations.

The work of school boards can be supported and strengthened by relevant orientation and professional development.

The work of school boards can be strengthened if all board members are required to participate periodically in professional development that might be offered by PSBA, intermediate units, the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE), and other agencies approved by PDE.<sup>20</sup> Some initial orientation program should be a requirement for being seated on the board, and continuing periodic professional development during each term of office should be a requirement to remain in office and to stand for re-election. The work of boards as state agent, trustee, and effective intermediary and leader can be supported and strengthened by relevant orientation and professional development.

The orientation should be approximately 3-4 hours in duration and should focus on school law, the duties of board membership, and ethical behavior of board members. The law should allow this required orientation to be completed any time during a six-month period prior to being seated, thus allowing candidates to complete the requirement between the primary and general elections. This may inadvertently have the additional benefit of encouraging more informed candidates and campaign discussion. In addition to this required orientation, every school board president and the district's superintendent should provide every new board member with a thorough orientation to the work of the board and its adopted policies.

The requirement for periodic continuing professional development for all board members should focus on effective boardsmanship; education governance; finance; and standards, assessment, and accountability. These are subject areas suggested by EPLC survey respondents as particularly important. To the greatest degree possible, providers should make it available at times and locations most convenient for board members, or without regard to time or location through distance learning technology. The State Board of Education should require that district strategic plans include provisions for the continuing professional development of board members that is aligned with the district's strategic goals and concerns that are identified in board-superintendent self-assessments. School boards should provide the resources where needed to support professional development, but the Pennsylvania Department of Education also should provide for professional development opportunities without cost to school board members or their districts.

The district leadership team of superintendent and board should meet at least once a year to assess its own effectiveness. This assessment should help determine some of the professional development needs of board members and the board as a whole. Wherever

practical, the superintendent and the entire board should participate in professional development activities as a team.

Some representatives of school boards suggest that a requirement for orientation and continuing professional development might discourage some potential school board candidates. While some individuals may be discouraged from becoming candidates, that disinclination may in fact reflect their unwillingness to approach this work with the seriousness and preparation that is required for effective school board service.

The broad array of professional development programs offered by school board associations in most states, including Pennsylvania, attests to the value placed on professional development by these organizations. The active participation by many school board members in Pennsylvania in such professional development programs suggests the value placed on this kind of experience by conscientious board members. Despite the value placed on professional development by state school board associations and the benefits indicated by the participation of a substantial percentage of board members, a large number of board members choose not to participate. There is a public interest in having all board members participate in professional development activities, and mandatory professional development for all school board members will serve that public interest.

Some critics of mandatory professional development for school board members ask why a special mandate for only these elected officials who volunteer their services. But school board members also are special in ways that make orientation and professional development imperative. Boards are delegated by the General Assembly important authority and responsibility established in the state constitution for a mandated service to be provided to the citizens of Pennsylvania. Increasingly the vital work of school boards is conditioned by state and federal requirements that must be acknowledged and understood. A school board operates as a unicameral body without the “checks and balance” of another legislative body or an executive branch with veto authority. Each nine-member school board makes budget-related decisions about the use of local, state and federal funds made available to its district — typically millions of dollars in each district and an annual total of \$17 billion among Pennsylvania’s 501 districts.

Furthermore, an October 2003 article in a publication of the New York State School Boards Association reported that 17 states require training for school board members and that while “mandatory training is not the norm, the trend is spreading.”<sup>21</sup>

While it is important to recall that individual board members exercise authority only when they act collectively in public meetings (an issue discussed in the previous section), every December, school boards reorganize and elect their officers. The School Code specifies that the board president is responsible for presiding at meetings, calling

special meetings, and signing legal documents on behalf of the board. Of equal importance, board presidents often serve as informal sounding boards for their colleagues and for the superintendent, as partners with superintendents in establishing board agendas, and as the board's public face to the community. As such, they need to exhibit the same characteristics as all other effective board members, along with organizational leadership and communications skills and a high level of understanding of district goals and priorities.

## Accountability

School boards must be accountable to the state and to local citizens for governing their districts in ways that promote student achievement as the fundamental purpose of the public education system. In addition, board members need to hold themselves and each other accountable for working effectively as a leadership team with the superintendent. Amid pleas for “more” accountability, current accountability requirements in law should be noted.

State law currently provides several forms of accountability for local school boards. For decades, districts that became designated under state law as financially distressed have been taken over by court-appointed boards of control, and their elected school boards have had virtually all their authority (except the duty to levy taxes to pay for the board of control's budget) removed. At any given time during much of the past 20 years, there have been between one and three districts (some on more than one occasion) operated by such boards of control.

Second, since 2000, a dozen districts with persistent academic failures have been subjected to varying degrees of state intervention, including both supports and sanctions, under the state's Education Empowerment Act (four of them were removed from the empowerment list in February 2004). Three of these — Philadelphia, Harrisburg, and Chester-Upland — have had their school boards stripped of all or most of their authority, a condition that continues now in early 2004. In order to focus on No Child Left Behind accountability, the General Assembly enacted a provision in December 2003 declaring that no additional districts would become empowerment districts.

No Child Left Behind includes numerous accountability provisions for schools and districts failing to meet academic proficiency goals. These include requirements that districts provide technical assistance, intradistrict choice, tutoring services, and school restructuring in individual schools that are failing. States may take corrective action in failing districts. Such action might include deferring program funds, implementing new

Survey respondents were asked to rate the characteristics of effective board presidents as well as the characteristics of effective members. Interestingly, they rated every potential item as more important for presidents than for members at-large, with similar priorities: collaboration with the administration (98 percent very important), mutual respect and respect for others (94 percent), open communications (89 percent), open-mindedness (88 percent), and understanding effective management (62 percent).

curricula and professional development programs, replacing district personnel, establishing new governance structures, taking over district leadership, abolishing or restructuring districts, and permitting interdistrict transfers of students.

Third, school boards are accountable to local voters who can remove board members at the next election. Fourth, board members who fail to attend meetings can be removed by their boards, and members who refuse to perform duties required by state law can be removed by county courts upon the petition of 10 or more resident taxpayers.

Finally, there are numerous provisions of state law that make boards accountable to local and state residents. These include the Open Meeting Law, requiring that public decisions be made in public meetings; the Right-to-Know Law that gives citizens the right to access public records; the new Keystone Accountability program enacted in December 2003 that requires program audits of districts with associated rewards and sanctions; and legal requirements for regular audits and release of audit findings by both local district auditors and the state's Auditor General.

School boards, therefore, already are accountable to the state for at least some level of financial stewardship and academic success. And they are accountable to the electorate for representing the community's values effectively in the governance of the district.

Some argue that low voter turnout in school board elections and a dearth of candidates willing to run minimize the effectiveness of this accountability to the electorate. While the same could be said about almost all elections in the United States today (especially local elections), there are ways to increase participation, and the issues of expanding the candidate pool and electing the most effective boards possible are discussed in this report.

School districts need to nurture potential leaders by giving parents and other citizens opportunities to serve on school and district committees where they can learn more about the schools and how the district functions.

## Part V • Selecting School Boards

The work of school boards in Pennsylvania will be strengthened if more citizens are motivated and prepared to serve on local school boards, and to participate in the process of selecting board members.

The pool of potential leaders is larger in every community than the nine seats on the local school board, and yet some districts do not have even one candidate for each vacancy on the board. Almost two-thirds of board members are males. Only 1.2% of board members are minorities. The membership of Pennsylvania's school boards does not nearly reflect the diversity of students, voters, or all residents of the Commonwealth.

There are several keys to increasing the attractiveness of board service.

The first is to elevate the job of school board members by focusing on policymaking to improve student achievement and removing authority or perceived responsibility to manage the day-to-day affairs of the schools. Board members should be supported by appropriate orientation and professional development programs. In some instances, this focus and support may actually reduce the time commitment of board members.

Second, too many districts experience rapid and often continuing shifts in board majorities as a result of the four-year school board term and the requirement that at least four members be elected every two years. This causes instability in policy direction, contributes to short-term leadership of superintendents, often decreases the pool of superintendent candidates when vacancies occur, discourages teacher willingness to follow new directions, and contributes to the view that school boards do not provide stable community leadership. If a school district is to have the stability to follow a strategic plan to improve student achievement over the several years that improvement takes, the election cycle needs to be changed to reduce the likelihood of board majorities shifting in any single election. While a change to six-year terms for school board members will be controversial, it is important to consider the positive effect the suggested change can have on the interests of students who are to be served by the board and district.

There was a clear consensus among the members of the K-12 Governance Study Group that the job of the school board member must be made more attractive if more citizens are likely to participate as candidates. Compensation was rejected as a tool. But it was agreed that a combination of six-year terms with board responsibilities more clearly

focused on policymaking rather than micromanagement would be more attractive. More citizens likely would be willing to consider serving because the job would be more interesting and important and because they would have to campaign less frequently. The members also emphasized that the prospect of becoming a participant becomes more attractive when board meetings are run in a professional and respectful manner.

Third, school districts need to nurture potential leaders by giving parents and other citizens opportunities to serve on school and district committees where they can learn more about the schools and how the district functions. School districts have opportunities for citizen involvement and could create more. These include district strategic planning committees, other district and school committees, advisory groups to the board itself, PTAs, and more. Welcoming citizens to participate in these ways should increase the number of people in a community with knowledge of and commitment to the schools — a likely pool of future school board candidates that should be encouraged.

Each school board should analyze its current expertise to determine missing skills and experiences and then recruit future board members specifically for those skills and experiences. Community organizations recruiting candidates should do likewise. Effective boards represent diverse experiences and points of view. As boards fill short-term vacancies, and as board members and others recruit fellow citizens to run for school board, they should attempt to broaden this diversity of experience and expertise.

Fourth, business and community leaders need to publicly affirm the value of public education, seek out future leaders, and provide them with opportunities to serve and the professional development to serve effectively. Incumbent board members and superintendents need to reach out to other community leaders — not just to provide additional services to students but also as potential sources of board members. Logical places to begin such collaborations are community service clubs such as Kiwanis and Rotary, Chambers of Commerce, and leaders of local community and philanthropic organizations. Employers should encourage managers and other capable employees with leadership potential to seek election to the school board.

The Allentown School District is an example where several new board members were earlier identified as potential candidates by business and philanthropic leaders in the community, who then assisted them to participate in EPLC's Institute for Community Leadership in Education (ICLE), an experience viewed by many as valuable preparation for school board service.

Fifth, community organizations should organize activities for school board candidates and potential candidates to become better informed about board membership. Whether they have decided to run for the school board or are just considering the possibility,

All citizens need to understand the evolving role of school boards... the school district's focus on student achievement, and the need to expect candidates for school board in their community to address issues of education policy during school board campaigns.

people will be more likely to serve and to be effective if they are well grounded in both the content of the work of board members and in the processes of effective boardsmanship.

Sixth, all citizens need to understand the evolving role of school boards discussed in this report, the school district's focus on student achievement, and the need to expect candidates for school board in their community to address issues of education policy during school board campaigns. Citizens need to understand the critical role the school board plays in the life of their community and in preparing the next generation for success, and each person must exercise his/her right to vote.

Assuming communities develop deeper and more motivated candidate pools, what needs to be done to ensure that voters are well informed about candidates and issues? Again, both the study group and the survey respondents considered this issue.

Many survey respondents reported attempting similar strategies — most generating relatively little interest. These included holding town meetings for candidates, publishing candidate questionnaires, televising board meetings and inviting the public to attend (which exposes only incumbents to public scrutiny), and encouraging media coverage of school board campaigns.

One approach to better informing citizens about board candidates is for community leaders such as the League of Women Voters, local Chambers, and PTAs to encourage public interest in board elections. If the strategies suggested previously increase the candidate pool and if elections are focused on policy issues, it is likely that voter interest will increase.

A promising effort was undertaken during the 2003 school board elections by the Allegheny Conference on Community Development (ACCD) working in conjunction with the League of Women Voters (LWV) to increase awareness of board elections in 138 districts in 11 southwestern Pennsylvania counties. ACCD distributed educational material to candidates and developed a questionnaire for them as well. The questionnaire results were the basis of an online voter guide issued in conjunction with LWV that was accessed more than 6,000 times during the last weeks of the campaign.

## School Board Member Profile

The “average” school board member in Pennsylvania is a white male in his late 40s who is well educated, well paid in his employment or profession, and married with two or three children in the public schools. On average, board members devote 16-20 hours per month to school board business.<sup>22</sup> The percentage of board members who are women is increasing and is now 38 percent. The percentage with college degrees or beyond also is increasing and is now 71 percent, while none has less than a high school diploma and only 15 percent have not attended college. There also is an increase in the income of board members, with 53 percent earning at least \$75,000. Only 19 percent of board members have served more than 10 years.<sup>23</sup>

The most recent school board elections were held in 2003 and resulted in about a 22 percent turnover of board members statewide. For most of the past decade, the turnover rate has been about 20-22 percent. In 2003, the average number of board members up for re-election was 5.2 (58 percent of the average board faced potential turnover). One district in six did not have enough candidates on the ballot to fill all vacancies.<sup>24</sup>

## Additional Policy Options

### *Elected or Appointed Boards*

Elected boards serve functions — representing community values, acting as representative taxing authorities, and engaging the broader community in public education — that appointed boards can at best match only marginally. This is especially true in the vast majority of Pennsylvania districts that do not have boundaries coterminous with a municipality in which an elected leader (such as a mayor) could be the appointing authority. Since the Pennsylvania State Constitution prohibits an appointed body from having taxing authority, some other elected body (such as a city council) must exercise the taxing authority for a school district that does not have an elected board.

Currently, one Pennsylvania district (Harrisburg) is under the control of the city's mayor and another (Philadelphia) is run by a commission appointed jointly by that city's mayor and the Governor. A commission in Pittsburgh recommended recently that the selection of board members for the Pittsburgh Public Schools be turned over to that city's mayor.<sup>25</sup> Several other large cities — Chicago, Cleveland, Boston, New York, and Milwaukee, for example — have experimented with varying forms of mayoral control in recent years, and this “movement” has begun to attract national attention. Since mayoral control of urban school districts is a recent phenomenon with a variety of manifestations, there is relatively little consistent research about the effects of such governance reforms, especially on student achievement.<sup>26</sup> Some have suggested that even without actual governance authority mayors can effectively intervene to improve schools in their cities by coordinating programs and funding sources and acting as advocates for local students and educational improvements.<sup>27</sup>

Michael Kirst, a leading scholar and practitioner of education governance, found that the success of mayoral takeovers depends in large measure upon the personal idiosyncrasies of the mayor, the specific local political context, and the existing relationships between the school district and the city.<sup>28</sup> Given that observation, as well as the lack of consistent research on the effects of takeovers and the relatively small number of urban districts in Pennsylvania that are coterminous with city boundaries, there does not appear to be compelling evidence to recommend mayoral control as a statewide policy to improve the governance of urban school districts. While the brief experience in Harrisburg is reasonably encouraging (increased enrollments, improved attendance, higher graduation rates, a renewed focus on literacy, the introduction of new programs such as early childhood and alternative education, small learning communities at the high school level, and some small early improvements in test scores), it should be studied further to see if improvements persist and the degree to which they are transferable to other cities.

We also reviewed a number of hybrid options. For example, Oakland, California has a ten-member board, including seven elected members and three appointed by the mayor, and Washington, D.C. has a nine-member board, including four appointed by the mayor and five

elected (four by regions and one citywide). The mayor and governor jointly appoint a nine-member board in Baltimore from a slate nominated by the State Board of Education. The Detroit board includes six members appointed by the mayor and one by the governor.<sup>29</sup>

As with simple mayoral takeovers, there is not compelling evidence that such hybrid systems lead to the kinds of improvements in achievement that would justify the diminution in representation through direct elections.

### *Partisan or Nonpartisan Elections*

While there are potential advantages to shifting to nonpartisan elections, we think there is more to be said for maintaining the current system, in which candidates may affiliate with a single party and may also cross-file and run in both Republican and Democratic primaries (which is quite prevalent in many parts of the state). Nonpartisan elections might shield the board's policymaking function from local political considerations and reduce the tendency of some potential candidates to seek board service as a steppingstone to "higher" elective office. On the other hand, the current system requires candidates to pass through two "screens" with the electorate — the primary and general elections. This gives citizens a better opportunity to assess candidates, and this more rigorous electoral process is particularly important when coupled with the recommendation to return to six-year terms since candidates would then face the voters less frequently.

### *At-large or Regional Elections*

When Pennsylvania reorganized its 2000-plus school districts into 501, it gave local citizens the option of deciding if they wanted to elect school board members by region or in at-large elections. (When the General Assembly converted Pittsburgh's appointed board to an elected board, it required that the board be elected by region.) There are two primary reasons for choosing regional elections. One is prevalent in urban districts — ensuring the likelihood of some racial/ethnic balance on the board. The other is prevalent in rural districts — ensuring that communities that are often miles apart, often with long histories of pre-consolidation rivalries, all have an opportunity to be represented on the school board. About 63 percent of the state's districts elect board members at-large, while 29 percent elect them from three regions, 6 percent elect them from nine regions, and 2 percent elect some members regionally and some at-large.<sup>30</sup> There does not appear to be a compelling reason to ask the state to impose a one-size-fits-all model on all the districts in this very diverse state. At the same time, as discussed throughout this report, each board member has an obligation — once elected — to serve all of the district's citizens, whether he or she is elected regionally or at-large.

## Part VI • Recommendations

### *Recommendations for State Policymakers:*

1. State leaders, including the Governor, the Secretary of Education, members of the State Board of Education, and members of the General Assembly, should seek and exercise opportunities to publicly affirm the value of school board service.
2. The General Assembly should amend the School Code to provide comprehensive statements of school board and superintendent roles, with the board focused on governance and policymaking and the superintendent focused on educational leadership and policy implementation (see recommendations 3-4 below).
  - The General Assembly should stipulate that the school board's role is to levy local taxes and oversee the use of resources that promote success for all students, set policy to guide the district's progress in that regard, and represent the needs of the community to the district and the needs of the district to the community.
  - The General Assembly should amend the School Code to stipulate that the superintendent's role is to serve as the educational leader and the chief executive officer of the district.
  - The General Assembly should amend the School Code to repeal managerial duties currently assigned to the school board that are not consistent with the responsibilities in recommendation 3.
  - The General Assembly should apply this same distinction in future lawmaking on this subject.
3. The General Assembly should amend the School Code to specify the school board's responsibilities as follows:
  - a) *Hire a district superintendent and conduct an annual evaluation of the superintendent's performance.*
  - b) *Develop hiring policies and procedures. Then, hire and dismiss other personnel only upon the recommendation of the superintendent.*
  - c) *Adopt and periodically update a strategic plan that specifies desired standards of student achievement, methods of assessing student achievement, strategies that will be employed to reach the desired levels of achievement, and the resources that will be required to implement the strategies.*

- d) *Adopt facilities plans, staffing plans, and professional development plans that are linked to the strategic plan for accomplishment of district priority goals and student learning objectives.*
- e) *Adopt an annual budget that targets funds for the strategies that have been identified in the strategic plan to improve student achievement.*
- f) *Levy taxes to fund the annual budget.*
- g) *Approve expenditures in line with the budget.*
- h) *Establish and regularly review policies that define the Board's structure, rules of procedure, communication and decision-making processes, code of conduct, and other policies pertaining to district governance.*
- i) *Establish and regularly review policies that set expectations for the district's educational and operational functions.*
- j) *Establish procedures for public and staff input into board policy decisions.*
- k) *Establish procedures for public reporting of student achievement data and progress on district goals and priorities.*
- l) *Annually assess its own performance and that of the board-superintendent leadership team.*

**4. The General Assembly should amend the School Code to specify the district superintendent's responsibilities as follows:**

- a) *Work with board, staff, and community to develop a strategic plan for board adoption that specifies desired standards of student achievement, methods of assessing student achievement, strategies that will be employed to reach the desired levels of achievement, and the resources that will be required to implement the strategies.*
- b) *Recommend to the board facilities plans, staffing plans, and professional development plans that are linked to the strategic plan for accomplishment of district priority goals and student learning objectives.*
- c) *Develop and recommend to the board an annual budget within the board's overall parameters that targets funds for the strategies that have been identified in the strategic plan to improve student achievement.*
- d) *Recommend to the board the hiring and evaluation of all district staff; recommend to the board dismissal of staff when necessary.*
- e) *Provide complete and objective data and other information about student achievement and other district goals to all members of the board to help them make informed and effective policy decisions.*

- f) Attend all meetings of the board and provide professional recommendations for their consideration.*
- g) Develop communications tools and processes that provide clear and useful information to the board, the staff, and the general public about student achievement and other district priority goals.*

**5. The General Assembly should require each school board member elected or appointed for the first time to complete an orientation session provided by PSBA, an intermediate unit, or PDE, within six months prior to taking office.**

- This orientation should be approximately 3-4 hours in duration and should focus on school law, the duties of board membership, and ethical behavior of board members.

**6. The General Assembly should require each school board member once seated to periodically participate in continuing professional development in order to remain in office and to qualify to seek re-election.**

- This continuing professional development should focus on effective boardsmanship; education governance; finance; and standards, assessment, and accountability. To the greatest degree possible, providers should make it available at times and locations most convenient for board members, or without regard to time or location through distance learning technology.
- The State Board of Education should require that district strategic plans include provisions for the continuing professional development of board members that is aligned with the district's strategic goals and concerns that are identified in board-superintendent self-assessments.
- The General Assembly should require and fund PDE to provide an opportunity for at least some of this professional development (directly or under contract) at no cost to school board members or their districts, just as it does for teachers under Act 48 of 1999.
- PDE should develop a list of approved providers of professional development for school board members, including PSBA, intermediate units and others.

**7. The General Assembly should increase the term of school board members to six years, with three of the nine seats up for election every two years.**

## *Recommendations for School Boards and Superintendents:*

8. Each school board and its superintendent should develop collaborative and mutually supportive approaches to team leadership of their districts and should reflect those in a district governance-management compact. (A model compact developed by EPLC is available in Appendix D.)
  - Each superintendent should respect the governance function of his/her board, and every board should respect the educational leadership and executive authority of its superintendent.
9. School board members should never act as if they have authority as individuals, recognizing that all board functions are performed only as a collective body based upon the decisions of the majority of members.
  - Once board decisions are made, all board members and the superintendent should respect and honor those decisions, and the superintendent and district staff should implement them.
10. The district leadership team of superintendent and board members should engage in open and mutually respectful communication among themselves and should provide multiple opportunities for citizen input.
11. The district leadership team of superintendent and board should meet at least once a year to assess its own effectiveness.
12. The superintendent should consult regularly with other community providers of educational and social services to develop a comprehensive approach to helping all children succeed and to minimize the duplication of services.
13. Each school board should adopt as policy a code of conduct to guide the actions of individual board members. (A model code is available in Appendix E.)
14. Each school board should support the continuing professional development of all its members by allocating necessary resources and by establishing mutual expectations among members.
  - Each school district's strategic plan should include provisions for the continuing professional development of board members that is aligned with the district's strategic goals and with concerns that are identified in board-superintendent self-assessments.

- Every school board and its superintendent should engage jointly in professional development whenever practical.

**15. Each school board president should act as the board's public spokesperson and leader.**

- Every board president should work closely with his/her superintendent to ensure collaborative policy development and implementation without relieving the superintendent of his/her responsibility to keep all board members informed.
- In some cases, with the consent of the president, another board member may be designated to speak on behalf of the board.

**16. Each school board should use the NCLB requirement of an annual report to parents and the community (along with their routine communications efforts) as a vehicle for regularly describing progress toward meeting student learning and other priority goals of the district.**

**17. School board members should conduct their meetings in a professional and dignified manner that focuses on student achievement issues and the board's policy role.**

**18. School boards and superintendents should encourage the local media to cover board meetings and focus on the district's progress in meeting its priority goals.**

**19. School boards and administrators should provide multiple opportunities for interested parents and citizens to participate on school and district committees, in order to expand the pool of citizens familiar with the work of the district and its board.**

**20. In filling board vacancies, every school board should seek to broaden the expertise of its members and also seek to appoint citizens who might have an interest in longer-term board service.**

**21. The school board president and the district's superintendent should provide every new board member with a thorough orientation to the work of the board and its adopted policies.**

## *Recommendations for Voters and Community Leaders:*

22. All citizens of every school district should understand that the school board's role is to set policy for the district, not to resolve problems of individual parents, students, or staff.
  - Citizens should take specific concerns about district programs and operations to appropriate district personnel as designated by the superintendent.
  - Citizens should understand that the board has authority only when it acts as a collective body.
23. All citizens should participate in school board meetings where practical and utilize other opportunities to communicate with school district leaders to promote clear communication between the district and the larger community.
24. All citizens should expect candidates for school boards to be familiar with the responsibilities of school boards and board members and to describe their knowledge about key issues during school board elections.
25. All citizens have a responsibility to inform themselves about school district issues and school board candidates and should vote in school board elections.
26. Leaders of businesses and community organizations should seek and exercise opportunities to publicly affirm the value of school board service and encourage their employees, friends, and neighbors who would be effective school board members to run for office.
27. Local media managers should devote sufficient resources to ensure fair and comprehensive coverage of school board meetings and school board campaigns in their market areas and should focus public attention on the progress of districts in meeting their respective priority goals and promoting student achievement.
  - Print and broadcast media should use their resources to promote a greater public understanding of significant education issues and to promote greater public participation in the work of school districts and school board elections.
28. Leaders of business and civic organizations in other communities or regions of the state should replicate the 2003 efforts of the Allegheny Conference on Community Development and the League of Women Voters to inform southwestern Pennsylvania voters about school board candidates and issues.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Education Commission of the States. *Governing America's Schools: Changing the Rules*. 1999
- <sup>2</sup> Committee for Economic Development. *Putting Learning First: Governing and Managing the Schools for High Achievement*. 1994
- <sup>3</sup> Boyle, P. Presentation to EPLC K-12 Governance Project Study Group. September 30, 2003.
- <sup>4</sup> Education Commission of the States. *Op. cit.*
- <sup>5</sup> Gemberling, K. W., Smith, C. W., and Villani, J. S. *The Key Work of School Boards Guidebook*. 2000. Emphasis added.
- <sup>6</sup> Goodman, R. and Zimmerman, W. *Thinking Differently: Recommendations for 21st Century School Board/Superintendent Leadership, Governance, and Teamwork for High Student Achievement*. 2000.
- <sup>7</sup> Land, D. *Local School Boards Under Review: Their Role and Effectiveness in Relation to Students' Academic Achievement*. 2002.
- <sup>8</sup> Danzberger, J. P. and Usdan, M. D. "Local Education Governance: Perspectives on Problems and Strategies for Change." *Phi Delta Kappan* (75(5)). 1994; Iannaccone, L. and Lutz, F. W. "The Crucible of Democracy: The Local Arena." *Politics of Education Association Yearbook*. 1994; Kirst, M. W. "A Changing Context Means School Board Reform." *Phi Delta Kappan* (75(5)). 1994. Exceptions include Hawaii's statewide governance structure, urban districts that have been taken over by their mayors, some boards that are appointed, and a shrinking number of superintendents who are elected by local voters.
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- <sup>12</sup> Resnick, M. A. *Effective School Governance: A Look at Today's Practice and Tomorrow's Promise*. 1999.
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- <sup>18</sup> Brumbaugh, S. L. *Op. cit.*
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- <sup>20</sup> For example, EPLC provides professional development programs for school board candidates and both statewide and local education leadership programs that often are attended by school board members and those considering running for school board.
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## Appendix A

The Education Policy and Leadership Center expresses great appreciation to the members of the EPLC K-12 Governance Study Group for their contributions to this report.

### K-12 GOVERNANCE STUDY GROUP MEMBERS

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 Pennsylvania Department of Education  
*Former School Director and Former Superintendent, Greater Johnstown Area School District*

## Appendix B

### EPLC STAFF BIOGRAPHIES

#### Ronald Cowell

Ron Cowell has been president of The Education Policy and Leadership Center since 1999 and is responsible for the day-to-day activities of the Center and its various projects. He previously served for 24 years in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives (1975-1998) and 12 years as majority or minority chair of the House Committee on Education. For 12 years, he also served on the Pennsylvania State Board of Education.

At the national level, Ron has served on several K-12 and higher education advisory committees and the National Education Goals Panel. He also served as Vice Chair of the Education Commission of the States, chair of the Government Affairs Committee of the National Association of State Boards of Education, and chair of the Education Committee of the National Conference of State Legislatures. Ron is a graduate of the University of Pittsburgh and Widener University Law School.

#### Sharon Brumbaugh

Sharon Brumbaugh is Manager of Leadership Programs at The Education Policy and Leadership Center. She previously worked as a consultant with school districts and community organizations as a trainer and facilitator for new board member orientation, board development, team building, conflict resolution, organizational change, and strategic planning. Her prior work includes Director of In-service Education for the Pennsylvania School Boards Association. Sharon served on the Bellefonte School Board for 14 years. During that time, she served on the executive board of the Pennsylvania School Boards Association and was president of PSBA in 1989. Sharon has served on several state boards and commissions including the Pennsylvania Professional Standards and Practices Commission.

At the national level, Sharon was involved with some of the initial efforts to examine and transform school governance and to strengthen the role of policymakers in school reform. In 1990, she was one of six school board members in the nation who joined six state legislators on a Panel on Policy Options for Restructuring Education. In 1992, she served on the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on School Governance.

#### Robert E. Feir

Robert E. Feir has been President of EdStrat21, an education strategies consulting firm with strengths in research, planning, evaluation, policy development, program design, project management, and grant writing, since 1997. During the spring and summer of 2001, he provided staff support to the Empowerment Team of the Harrisburg School District and now serves as a member of that district's Board of Control. He also serves as Director of Education Initiatives for Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children and Senior Fellow at The Education Policy and Leadership Center.

From 1994-1997, he served as Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Business Education Partnership. Between 1981 and 1994, he held a number of Pennsylvania state policy positions, including Executive Director of the State Board of Education and the Senate Education Committee and Director of Policy for the Department of Education. Prior to his Pennsylvania state level work, he was a teacher, curriculum coordinator, school superintendent, and assistant director of an intermediate unit.

He holds a Ph.D. in political science from The Pennsylvania State University and masters degrees in political science from the State University of New York at Albany and in education administration from Bucknell University.

#### Karen Molchanow

Karen Molchanow currently serves as Coordinator of Policy Information and Programs for The Education Policy and Leadership Center. Karen joined EPLC in August 2001. She is responsible for producing the Pennsylvania Education Policy Letter, maintaining EPLC's web site, and assisting with EPLC's policy study groups. Karen graduated from Millersville University's Honors College with a Bachelor of Arts in English and dual minors in Print Journalism and Political Science.

## Appendix C

### SUPERINTENDENT-SCHOOL BOARD SURVEY INSTRUMENT

(1) The qualifications for election to a school board in Pennsylvania are that a person must reside in the district for at least one year, be at least 18 years of age, and be of good moral character. Should there also be a minimum educational requirement?

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> No                         | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, a college degree                                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, a high school diploma | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, required preservice training for school board members |

(2) What should be the length of a school board member's term (check one)?

- |                                  |   |
|----------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Years | <input type="checkbox"/> 6 Years                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 4 Years | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify) |

(3) Should school board members be required to participate in continuing professional development in order to retain their seats? If so, please check all areas in which professional development should be required.

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> No  | <input type="checkbox"/> Education governance and law     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Board members should be required to participate in a minimum number of hours of professional development, but the content should not be specified | <input type="checkbox"/> Education finance                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Standards, assessment, accountability   | <input type="checkbox"/> Technology in education          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Engaging parents and community  | <input type="checkbox"/> Early childhood/school readiness |
|  | <input type="checkbox"/> Effective Boardmanship           |
|  | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify)           |

(4) What are the most important characteristics of effective school board operations?

	Very Important	Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
Collaboration with superintendent and management team				
Representativeness of the community				
Understanding of education issues				
Understanding of school finance				
Understanding of school law				
Understanding effective management				
Focus on student achievement				
Effective decision-making processes				
Open communication				
Informed discussion of issues				
Mutual respect and respect for others in the district				

(5) If there are characteristics important to effective school board operations that are not included in the list above, please identify these characteristics below.

(6) What are the most important characteristics of an effective school board member?

	<b>Very Important</b>	<b>Important</b>	<b>Somewhat Important</b>	<b>Not Important</b>
Collaboration with superintendent and management team				
Representativeness of the community				
Understanding of education issues				
Understanding of school finance				
Understanding of school law				
Understanding effective management				
Focus on student achievement				
Intelligence				
Open communication				
Open-mindedness				
Experience in education				
Experience in management				
Mutual respect and respect for others in the district				

(7) If there are characteristics important to an effective school board member that are not included in the list above, please identify these characteristics below.

(8) What are the most important characteristics of an effective school board president?

	<b>Very Important</b>	<b>Important</b>	<b>Somewhat Important</b>	<b>Not Important</b>
Collaboration with superintendent and management team				
Representativeness of the community				
Understanding of education issues				
Understanding of school finance				
Understanding of school law				
Understanding effective management				
Focus on student achievement				
Intelligence				
Open communication				
Open-mindedness				
Experience in education				
Experience in management				
Mutual respect and respect for others in the district				

(9) If there are characteristics important to an effective school board president that are not included in the list above, please identify these characteristics below.

(10) For which of the following should school boards and superintendents be held accountable by the public (check all that apply):

	<b>School Boards</b>	<b>Superintendents</b>
Student achievement		
Fiscal stewardship of the district		
Clear and focused leadership		
Communication with and involvement of the community		
Quality staffing of the schools		

- (11) Are there other measures for which school boards and superintendents should be held accountable by the public that are not listed in Question 10? If so, please explain below.
- (12) In considering the following list of responsibilities, please indicate those areas where the school board has primary responsibility and those areas that are the primary responsibility of the superintendent:

	School Boards	Superintendents
Establishing school district policy		
Developing a strategic plan		
Proposing a budget		
Maintaining fiscal oversight		
Hiring and evaluating personnel		
Establishing school district goals		
Establishing student learning goals		
Determining appropriate academic and non-academic programs		
Determining methods of assessing student progress		
Communicating with the staff		
Communicating with the public		

- (13) Are there aspects of the School Code's descriptions of board and superintendent responsibilities that impede effective school governance? If so, how could they be improved?
- (14) What is the best way to select school board members?
- At-large elections
  - Elections by region
  - Appointment (if so, by whom? Explain below.)
  - Combination of election and appointment (if so, please explain below.)
- (15) Should school board members be paid? If so, how much?
- No
  - Up to \$100 per month
  - \$101-\$500 per month
  - \$501-\$1,000 per month
  - \$1,001-\$2,000 per month
  - More than \$2,000 per month
- (16) How can the pool of individuals prepared and motivated to serve on local school boards be expanded?
- (17) How can voters be best informed about qualifications and views of school board candidates?
- (18) Do you currently serve as a:
- School Board President
  - Superintendent
- (19) In which school district do you currently serve?
- (20) Is the district in which you currently serve located in an urban, rural or suburban region of the Commonwealth?
- (21) How many years have you served as either a school board member or school district superintendent?

## Appendix D

### Model Governance-Management Compact

To be considered, amended as necessary and then mutually agreed to  
by the Board of Directors and Superintendent in each school district

*Recommended by K-12 Governance Report of  
The Education Policy and Leadership Center — March 2004*

### Governance-Management Compact

*Roles and Responsibilities  
of the Board of School Directors and the Superintendent  
in the \_\_\_\_\_ School District*

The Board of School Directors and the Superintendent of the \_\_\_\_\_ School District acknowledge our collective responsibility to govern and manage the school district with integrity and as good stewards of the public trust. Therefore, we agree to work collaboratively as a team, to abide by the following principles, and to be held accountable for our performance as a leadership team.

#### Operating Principles

- Our common purpose is to lead a learning community that is focused on helping all students achieve success in reaching high educational standards.
- That purpose will guide our decisions regarding board policy, management and operation of the school district.
- As agents of the state, we will operate according to the established laws, rules, and regulations of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the United States of America.
- In performing our duties, we will demonstrate the highest standards of ethical and professional conduct, and we will treat everyone with dignity and respect.
- As stewards of the public trust, we will govern and manage the district responsibly to serve the current and future needs of the community.
- As a team, we will work together. The superintendent is responsible for informing the board and recommending to the board policies (e.g., budget) and actions (e.g.,

personnel), while the board is responsible for considering the superintendent's advice and approving or disapproving it.

### **Role of the Board of School Directors**

- We recognize that the legal authority of the Board lies with the collective body, not with individual members; therefore, we will work collaboratively to make good policy decisions.
- The primary work of the Board involves five major areas:

#### Planning — The Board shall:

- ✓ Work with the superintendent and the community to establish strategic direction for the district by adopting and annually reviewing a strategic plan that describes the vision, mission, values, priority goals, strategies, educational standards and methods of assessment.
- ✓ Adopt an annual budget plan that is aligned with the district priority goals and student learning objectives as described in the strategic plan.
- ✓ Adopt professional development plans for Board and staff that are linked to the accomplishment of district priority goals and student learning objectives.

#### Policymaking — The Board shall:

- ✓ Establish and regularly review policies that define the Board's structure, rules of procedure, communication and decision-making processes, code of conduct, and other policies that pertain to the governance function.
- ✓ Establish and regularly review policies that state expected results in regard to the educational and operational functions of the school district.
- ✓ Establish and regularly review policies that describe the relationship and division of responsibilities between the Board and the Superintendent.

#### Monitoring — The Board shall:

- ✓ In collaboration with the superintendent, establish objective criteria for assessing the performance of the superintendent in managing school district operations and conduct regular performance reviews.
- ✓ Adopt multiple measures of assessing student achievement and request regular progress reports.
- ✓ Adopt objective criteria for monitoring progress toward district priority goals.
- ✓ Maintain fiscal oversight by routinely reviewing reports on income and expenditures, audits, and financial planning documents.
- ✓ Monitor its own performance through the establishment of performance goals and regular self-assessment, including improvement strategies such as board professional development.

Communicating - The Board shall:

- ✓ Establish and honor procedures for public and staff input into Board policy decisions.
- ✓ Encourage public participation in board meetings.
- ✓ Maintain open and honest communications among all members of the Board and the Superintendent and with the public.
- ✓ Establish and monitor procedures for regular reporting of student achievement data and progress on district goals to parents and the general public.
- ✓ Create partnerships with other community service providers, when appropriate, to support the success of all children.

Advocating - The Board shall:

- ✓ Serve as a public advocate for the school district and the children and youth who live in the school district.
- ✓ Maintain communications with other federal, state and local policymakers in regard to public policies that impact education and children.
- ✓ Be advocates for board service and encourage qualified citizens to run for election to the school board.

**Role of the Superintendent**

- As the Chief Executive Officer and educational leader, the primary responsibility of the Superintendent is to provide leadership and organizational management for the total operation of the school district and to be accountable to the Board of School Directors for district performance.
- The Superintendent shall be guided by the policies of the Board of School Directors, shall maintain frequent and open communications with all members of the board, and shall work collaboratively with the Board to inform the decision-making process.
- It shall be the duty of the Superintendent to:
  - ✓ Establish an organizational structure and educational programs that are conducive to creating conditions of success for all students to meet high educational standards.
  - ✓ Provide leadership in the development and regular review of the district's strategic plan and the establishment of annual priority goals and student learning objectives.

- ✓ Recommend for Board action the hiring of appropriate and qualified staff to carry out district goals.
- ✓ Monitor student and staff performance and provide regular feedback to the Board.
- ✓ Maintain prudent fiscal oversight and recommend for Board action annual budget plans that are aligned with the district priorities and student learning objectives.
- ✓ Provide qualitative data and information to all members of the Board to help them make good policy decisions.
- ✓ Maintain positive relationships with community stakeholders.
- ✓ Plan for and recommend professional development plans that meet the needs of individual staff members as well as district priority goals and student instructional needs.
- ✓ Create partnerships with other community service providers, when appropriate, to support the success of all children.
- ✓ Practice and institutionalize within the school district the concept of continuous improvement.
- ✓ Serve as a public advocate for the school district and the children and youth who live in the school district.

## Appendix E

### Model Code of Conduct

To be considered, amended as necessary and then adopted  
voluntarily by the Board of Directors in each school district

*Recommended by K-12 Governance Report of  
The Education Policy and Leadership Center — March 2004*

#### *Code of Conduct for Board Members* \_\_\_\_\_ *School District*

Each member of the Board of Directors of the \_\_\_\_\_ School District shall:

1. Be committed to board decision-making that is focused on helping all students achieve success in reaching high educational standards;
2. In the performance of their duties, demonstrate the highest standards of ethical and professional conduct, and treat all others with dignity and respect;
3. Devote time, thought, and study to the duties and responsibilities of a school board member in order to render effective and creditable service;
4. Attend all regularly scheduled board meetings insofar as possible;
5. Participate annually in professional development activities for board members and the board provided by the state and national school boards associations and other organizations;
6. Remember at all times that as an individual the member has no authority outside of meetings of the board, and conduct all relationships with the school staff, media, and all others on the basis of this fact;
7. Work with fellow board members in a spirit of harmony and cooperation while respecting the right of other board members to have opinions and ideas which differ;
8. Enact policies and other official actions only after public notice and full discussion at meetings of the board;

9. Welcome and encourage active cooperation by citizens, organizations and the media with respect to establishing policy on current school operations and proposed future developments;
10. Recognize that the primary functions of the board are to establish policies by which the school district is to be administered and to hire and then annually evaluate the performance of the superintendent, but that the administration of the educational program and the conduct of school business shall be delegated to the superintendent and his or her professional and nonprofessional staff;
11. Support the employment of those persons best qualified to serve as school staff, and insist on a regular and impartial evaluation of all staff;
12. Communicate concerns and public reaction to board policies and school programs to the superintendent and other board members in a professional manner;
13. Represent the interests of the entire school district when making decisions;
14. Base personal decisions in all school district matters upon the available facts in each situation and honest and independent judgement, and refuse to surrender that judgement to any other individual, group or organization;
15. Avoid all conflicts of interest and refrain from using the board position for personal or partisan gain;
16. Take no individual action that will compromise the integrity or reputation of the board, the administration or the district, and respect the confidentiality of information that is privileged under applicable law;
17. Insist that all board and district business is ethical and honest;
18. Comply with all laws of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the United States of America.

## The Education Policy and Leadership Center

The Education Policy and Leadership Center is an independent, non-partisan and not-for-profit organization established in 1998 and based in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

The mission of The Education Policy and Leadership Center is to encourage and support the use of more effective state-level education policies to improve student learning in grades K-12, increase the effective operation of schools, and enhance educational opportunities for citizens of all ages.

The Education Policy and Leadership Center had developed and implements three discrete but complementary core strategies to support its mission. These strategies are to:

- Link relevant and reliable research and other information to state-level education policymakers and others and to provide assistance with policy analysis and policy development.
- Develop awareness and capacity among policymakers, educators and community leaders to serve as advocates and champions for significant education policy issues.
- Promote a public climate that expects and rewards policymakers to act to improve education policy.

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