Are School Boards an Effective Means of School Governance? A Micropolitical Perspective

Jane Clark Lindle
Clemson University, jlindle@clemson.edu

Recommended Citation
https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/eugene_pubs/20
Kentucky has witnessed many changes in educational administration. An assessment of those changes, with a focus on school boards, was done. School boards are not efficient bodies and this is not a problem. If efficiency was the top concern, then minimizing time and costs would be dominant and schools would suffer. School boards are not particularly elite or expert forums and but this is preferable since such boards are forums for public interest. Finally, school boards are regarded as democratic, but by no means are they apolitical. Boards are the middle ground between public and private interests; the focus on contracts and personnel is probably coopted by communities or educators. Micropolitics permeate school boards; the democratic process and purpose of schooling demand micropolitical outlets such as school boards. Values for democracy perpetuate micropolitics to the point that school-site management offers another outlet for micropolitics. School-site management is not only effective in the micropolitical sense, it has spawned a new definition of local control: local school councils. (RJM)
AERA, 1998
Session 27.66
Are School Boards an effective means of school governance?  
A micropolitical perspective

by
Jane Clark Lindle, Ph.D., Associate Professor & Codirector  
University of Kentucky/ University of Louisville  
Joint Center for the Study of Educational Policy  
101 Taylor Education Building  
Lexington, KY 40506-0001  
(606)257-6734  
Fax: (606)323-9799  
E-mail: kera@pop.uky.edu

Introduction

I want to begin my remarks with some concessions about the nature of boards. To do that I address the question: What do we mean by effective? And I answer, of course, effective is not the same thing as efficient; nor is it the forum for elite or expert advice; and finally while school boards may be a form of local democracy, by that definition they are not apolitical. I conclude by explaining how micropolitics permeate the status of local school boards today using the example of the state with which I'm most familiar: Kentucky. My position is that democratic processes and purposes of schooling demand micropolitical outlets such as school boards. Further, I contend that our values for democracy perpetuate micropolitics to the point that school site management offers another outlet for micropolitics. School boards are not only effective in the micropolitical sense, they have spawned a new definition of local control ---- local school councils.

First concession: school boards are not efficient. 

School boards are not an efficient body nor are they engaged in management efficiencies, but that's not a problem. Education is a labor-intensive enterprise. Learning depends on the relationships surrounding the acts of teaching and learning. Otherwise we wouldn't spend so much time concerned about school climate and culture, teacher morale, and student disengagement. If we were concerned only with efficiency, we'd simply concentrate on minimizing the time and other costs involved in delivering instruction. Instead, we are engaged in national debates about increasing time in school using coincidental information that nations that performing better on international achievement measures require more time in school. I submit that boards are not particularly efficient, but I do so arguing that despite a dominant U.S. cultural value for efficiency in other enterprises, efficiency is a low priority in education.

Second concession: schools boards are not particularly elite or expert forums.

They aren't, and they aren't supposed to be. School boards are forums for the public
School boards are a "little d", democratic forum for the common citizen to express their desires to the elites of schools — teachers and administrators. School boards are an interesting example of a "check & balance" in the continual "little d", democratic struggle for equilibrium among competing interests. The competing interests in this situation are the general goals held by those with no children in school (these days that's not just a growing number of taxpayers in our graying population, but teachers and administrators as well) — and the specific goals held by all parents for their children. In addition, since the advent of collective bargaining, the debate has shifted from general and specific goals for children to general and specific goals for workers in schools.

School boards are the only public forum where public and private interests are openly debated. But because boards are the middle ground between public and private interests, they are anything but non-partisan (in the "little p" and sometimes the "big P", party-sense).

The fact that boards have been diverted from attention to "true" educational issues, depending on your perspective of what a true issue is, is a prime example of democracy at work. That is, boards that focus on contracts and personnel are probably coopted — a micropolitical process — by either their communities or their educators. Communities want jobs. Educators, despite some loud public protests to the contrary, like boards that attend to busses, bonds, and business, because they can maintain their "expert" status in the school walls. In other words, boards that are diverted from the core of education — instruction and curriculum — may insulate the educators to such decisions.

Kentucky

In my state, the degree to which school boards had been coopted in some communities is well-documented. There were persistently flagrant ethical violations of boards members and fiscal mismanagement. So one feature of the 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act was revision of governance structures. This included new nepotism laws — yet, nothing was done about cronyism — and the creation of school-based decision making councils which have enormous powers to construct policy on curriculum and instruction. SBDM Councils include parents, teachers, and principals. And these are not apolitical bodies either. Moreover, the presence of SBDM Councils have not cleared up the ethical and fiscal problems in our most notorious school districts. However, there is evidence that SBDM Councils in those districts have been able to concentrate on the core of education — teaching and learning — despite the ongoing shenanigans in their local board offices.
Nevertheless, while principals dreaded the increased involvement and scrutiny of both teachers and parents, they are generally satisfied with the role of councils. Teachers are fairly satisfied, but not as much as principals. Parents are the least satisfied. And what we see in this litany of satisfaction is the pecking order of councils — a political feature, if you will. However an individual is placed on this pecking order, when given the opportunity to disband their councils, few have chosen to do so (less than 10%). I interpret this as evidence that despite the pecking order, most feel that SBDM is an accessible forum, perhaps more accessible than local school boards.

So in Kentucky, we have democratized school governance to a new degree. Local control is now found literally at each school house door. The democratization of schools is, by definition, a proliferation of political processes. Part of this struggle is a redefinition of the nature of forum provided by school boards. We are only now beginning to see new board roles emerging in Kentucky. We are in a state of flux produced by increased political participation in public discussion of schooling. If you haven’t figured it out yet — I think that’s a good thing.
I. DOCUMENT IDENTIFICATION:

Title: Are School Boards an effective means of school governance? A micropolitical Perspectives

Author(s): Jane Clark Lindle

Corporate Source: University of Kentucky

Publication Date: 1998

II. REPRODUCTION RELEASE:

In order to disseminate as widely as possible timely and significant materials of interest to the educational community, documents announced in the monthly abstract journal of the ERIC system, Resources in Education (RIE), are usually made available to users in microfiche, reproduced paper copy, and electronic media, and sold through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). Credit is given to the source of each document, and, if reproduction release is granted, one of the following notices is affixed to the document.

If permission is granted to reproduce and disseminate the identified document, please CHECK ONE of the following three options and sign at the bottom of the page.

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 1 documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Check here for Level 1 release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche and in other ERIC archival media (e.g., electronic) and paper copy.

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2A documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE, AND IN ELECTRONIC MEDIA FOR ERIC COLLECTION SUBSCRIBERS ONLY, HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Check here for Level 2A release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche and in electronic media for ERIC archival collection subscribers only.

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2B documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Check here for Level 2B release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche only.

Documents will be processed as indicated provided reproduction quality permits.

If permission to reproduce is granted, but no box is checked, documents will be processed at Level 1.

I hereby grant to the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) nonexclusive permission to reproduce and disseminate this document as indicated above. Reproducción from the ERIC microfiche or electronic media by persons other than ERIC employees and its system contractors requires permission from the copyright holder. Exception is made for non-profit reproduction by libraries and other service agencies to satisfy information needs of educators in response to discrete inquiries.

Signature: Jane Clark Lindle, Assoc. Professor

Printed Name/Position/Title: Jane Clark Lindle

Organization/Address: University of Kentucky

Telephone: (606) 257-7845

Fax: (606) 257-1015

E-Mail Address: clind000@pop.uky.edu

Date: 8/20/98
III. DOCUMENT AVAILABILITY INFORMATION (FROM NON-ERIC SOURCE)

If permission to reproduce is not granted to ERIC, or if you wish ERIC to cite the availability of the document from another source, please provide the following information regarding the availability of the document. (ERIC will not announce a document unless it is publicly available, and a dependable source can be specified. Contributors should also be aware that ERIC selection criteria are significantly more stringent for documents that cannot be made available through EDRS.)

Publisher/Distributor: 

Address: 

Price: 

IV. REFERRAL OF ERIC TO COPYRIGHT/REPRODUCTION RIGHTS HOLDER:

If the right to grant this reproduction release is held by someone other than the addressee, please provide the appropriate name and address:

Name: 

Address: 

V. WHERE TO SEND THIS FORM:

Send this form to the following ERIC Clearinghouse:

ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management
1787 Agate Street
5207 University of Oregon
Eugene, OR 97403-5207

However, if solicited by the ERIC Facility, or if making an unsolicited contribution to ERIC, return this form (and the document being contributed) to:

ERIC Processing and Reference Facility
1100 West Street, 2nd Floor
Laurel, Maryland 20707-3598

Telephone: 301-497-4080
Toll Free: 800-799-3742
FAX: 301-953-0263
e-mail: ericfac@inet.ed.gov
WWW: http://ericfac.plccard.csc.com

PREVIOUS VERSIONS OF THIS FORM ARE OBSOLETE.