



# **School District Size and the Impact of Changes to Governing School Boards**

**An Abbreviated Report**

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## January 2018

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### Overview

This abbreviated report follows from a focused literature search on school district governance. Specifically, I was asked to address the following questions:

- a. Drawing on scholarly sources, what *research* evidence exists that correlates the size of a school district governing board (i.e., the number of board members) with (a) the geographic size of the district, and (b) the population of the district?
- b. Drawing on both scholarly and public/government sources, what *research* evidence exists that describes and assesses the impact of changes to school district governing boards?

### Structure

By agreement with the Executive Director of the NSSBA, this abbreviated report is structured in bulleted format. These bullets draw on the literature listed in the Sources section at the end of the report. For ease of access, no direct quotations are taken from the literature and included within the document. However, the literature sources for the central ideas presented in the report are listed at the end of each bullet, where appropriate.

### Coverage

This abbreviated report is not the result of an exhaustive literature review. It focused narrowly on the two questions identified above and did not broaden into cognate literatures, such as corporate governing boards, not-for-profit boards, or public agency boards. The literatures for the second question drew largely on Canadian sources.

As mentioned above, the content of the bullets draws on the literatures identified within the report and in the Sources section at the end. However, I have also included anecdotal comments based on the more comprehensive literature review that I undertook for NSSBA in 2016 on the theoretical and conceptual foundations of school district governance, as well as on my academic background in organizational structure and culture.

## Results

### The Size Question

- I was unable to locate any credible research evidence that connected district population and/or geography with the number of members on a district governing board. Obviously, the size of an *elected* governing board may be connected to district geography and population simply by the number of elected seats it makes available (bigger areas/populations perhaps allotting more elected seats), but this can also be influenced by other factors, such as political considerations and past practices.

- What is apparent is the principle of local voice. While this is a broad category, and not specifically connected to size, it is seen both nationally and internationally as a fundamental democratic right. This came through strongly in the literature I cited in the 2016 manuscript, and it comes through again in this short study. I return to this later in the Impact section when speaking about the elimination of school boards in New Brunswick in the late 1990s. But the fundamental tenet is this: regardless of overt public interest in school board activities, or interest in running for school board elections, or attendance at public meetings, the elimination of school boards, and likely even a substantial reduction in boards or board members, invariably begets a negative and perhaps unexpected (to government) citizen backlash around perceived loss of local voice.
  - Primary sources re voice: Alsbury (2004); Boyd, Corter & Pelletier (2004); Galway, Sheppard, Wiens, & Brown (2013); Gaskell (2001); MacKinnon (2016).
  
- There is evidence that governments will frequently rationalize school governance changes based on arguments of equity and efficiency (more opportunities for students on the equity side; substantial cost savings on the efficiency side), but efficiency usually ends up being the driver. This often translates mainly into financial efficiency. The problem is that there is evidence that elimination or amalgamation can cost more. This results from having to replace the board structure with another structure, such as school councils and school trustees, to at least give the appearance of continued public involvement. These come with their own expenses, and there are frequently more of them than there were district boards. There is also an issue with empowerment, or more likely, disempowerment of these bodies, which I address later.
  - Primary sources re efficiency and rationalization: Ben Jaafar & Anderson (2007); Edwards Jr. (2010); Galway, Sheppard, Wiens, & Brown (2013); LeGrow (2000); Trujillo (2012).
  
- One notable caution about, and criticism of, the “local voice” campaign, is that it can itself become a vehicle for exclusion. This is increasingly so with the growth in the ethnocultural diversity of communities. A fundamental response to the call for local voice is to ask: whose voice? By whatever means, whether through election or appointment, or both, prominent and privileged individuals and groups can end up being (over)represented on school district governing boards, while minoritized groups are excluded, or only nominally included. This is a probable scenario, unless school board elections or appointments incorporate a policy on governing board diversity, which is the premise of the following bullet.
  - Source re local voice and exclusion: Gaskell (2001).
  
- Rather than linking membership on a governing board to a district’s geographic or population size, there is some evidence that connecting it to population *diversity* can have a positive impact. There is little research specific to diverse board membership *per se*, at least in an ethnocultural sense, although there is a substantial literature on the underrepresentation of minoritized cultural groups in school curriculum, school practices, and in the teaching and administrative ranks. One empirical study published in 2010 looked at 1,040 Texas school districts for the years 1997 – 2001 to determine the impact of Latino representation on boards, school administration, and teaching staff. Through a path analysis, the study found a “causal chain” from Latino representation on school boards to minority educational attainment.

Specifically, there was a strong and substantial directional link between the representation of Latinos on boards and the numbers of administrators and, to a lesser extent, teachers of ethnic background, as well as the presence of Latino issues in educational policy. There was also a link, albeit weak, between numbers of Latino teachers and minority student achievement.

- Source re Texas study: Ross, Rouse, & Bratton (2010).
- This latter point, while based solely on one study, is intriguing. In a time of heightened awareness of the marginalization and silencing of minoritized groups, and the growing commitment to correct these inequities, reducing local voice in any circumstance, including school board elections/appointments, carries substantial risk and works against the social grain. The issue is less one of voice versus no voice, but of whose voice. School board representation provides an opportunity to argue strongly for a form of representative diversity in board makeup, and the potential educational and other gains that could flow from that.

### The Impact Question

- The question of whether changes in school board structure and operation has an impact, begs the question: impact on what? From a research perspective, the answer to the core question of whether it impacts student achievement, is: likely not. The research evidence of an existing link between school board action and student achievement is generally weak, especially if the attempt is to draw a connection directly between governing board action and student outcomes. In the broader sense of “board,” i.e., the concerted action of governing board members with administrators and teachers on focused and long-term, well-resourced, initiatives to increase student achievement, demonstrates clear evidence of impact, some coming from Canadian studies.
  - Primary sources re “broader” impact: Bedard (2009); Brandon & Hanna (2013); Fullan (2009); Hargreaves & Ainscow (2015); Leithwood (2010); Leithwood & McCollough (2016).
- By far the strongest impact of changes to board structure and operation comes from public response. The case of New Brunswick is instructive. The Province of New Brunswick eliminated all school boards in 1996, without public consultation, replacing them with parental advisory councils at the school, regional, and provincial levels. The Minister at the time cited, among other things, low voter turnout for school board elections as evidence of public apathy. The new parental advisory council structure turned out to be more expensive than the previous board system. As well, the parental advisory councils had little to no influence on administrative and curriculum matters. Establishing the councils gave the impression of local voice, but they were not empowered with decision making authority. The public became increasingly aware of the loss of voice, and school governance became a central issue in the 1999 election campaign. Following the selection of a new government, New Brunswick (in 2001) established District Education Councils to work with each district’s superintendent, and Parent School Support Councils for each school to advise principals. I found no research evidence to indicate how this is working.
  - Sources re New Brunswick: LeGrow (2000); Linke (1999).

- A key concept that accompanies any structure designed to solicit local voice is *empowerment*. Since the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there has been a general trend towards more centralized control of public education, turning the centralized body/ministry into a form of quality control agent. The focus then turns to interests that are provincially defined and/or aligned with provincial goals and standards, with little direct input and impact from local groups or individuals.
  - Primary sources re reform and centralization: Ben Jaafar & Anderson (2007); Bennett (2014); Boyd (2008); Burns (2017); Edwards Jr. (2010); Galway, Sheppard, Wiens, & Brown (2013); Hunter & Dolmage (2013); Komatsu (2014); Mehra (2004); Sheppard & Galway (2016); Trujillo (2012).

### Concluding Comment

There is little research evidence pertaining to the appropriate or ideal size for district governing boards. Similarly, there is little research evidence pertaining to the impact of change in board structure and function, at least in terms of core board outcomes such as student achievement. However, this does *not* mean that the questions have been answered. It means only that there is insufficient research to draw on presently.

What *is* clear, to date, is that: (1) eliminating or reducing school boards has not produced the financial efficiencies frequently summoned to justify the action, and (2) the imperative of local voice remains a significant public issue, even when it appears otherwise in terms of everyday conspicuousness.

My sense, deriving from this abbreviated report and the more comprehensive one in 2016, is that there are two opportunities, both of which connect to the size and impact questions. **The first** pertains to what I am calling, for lack of a better term, **representative diversity**<sup>1</sup>. Rather than linking board size with either geography or population numbers, it may be appropriate to connect it to district ethnocultural and other diversities. While this could be a challenge to establish, and could vary from district to district, it would have the potential to positively impact educational outcomes for minoritized students and the presence of diversity issues in public and educational policy discourse.

**The second** pertains to **empowerment**. This has been an ongoing issue for school governance, especially since the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which has seen the increasing presence of central government in public school curriculum and school/board administration. Accompanying this has been a correlated loss of local control/voice. This has been demonstrated repeatedly through research studies of school districts in Canada and internationally. The precise impact of this has been varied and difficult to discern empirically. Nonetheless, the opportunity exists to engage the local empowerment conversation in meaningful ways, to ensure that the operation of a public education system in a social democracy is, in authentic ways, public.

<sup>1</sup> *In proposing representative diversity, I am not conceiving of it in a narrow proportional way. That is, and solely by way of example, I am not implying that if an ethnocultural group represents 30% of the local population, that 30% of that school district's board members therefore should be from that group, although that argument could be made. What I am suggesting is that that group's voices need to be well embodied on the board. Further, and in the opposite direction, I am not suggesting that if a local district is relatively homogeneous on selected diversity measures, these can then remain "off the table," as it were. Obviously, boards need to be especially mindful of their minoritized students and their school experiences. But dialogue on issues of equity and diversity is vital regardless of local demographics. One of the best and perhaps most impactful ways to engage this dialogue is by diversifying the organizations and decision-making structures that are involved in the education of children.*

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