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Strategies to Enhance Effectiveness of School Boards in Governance

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Strategies to Enhance Effectiveness of School Boards in Governance

A Dissertation

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF
CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY, ST. PAUL BY

Brian Gersich

Dr. Ric Dressen, Advisor

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I set out with a goal to complete my dissertation and be the next in my family to graduate. Since my oldest son, Noah, will work on completing a bachelor's and master's concurrently and graduate in the spring of 2025, and my youngest son, Sam, will graduate from high school in the spring of 2024, it appears I will achieve that goal. While I am proud of this accomplishment, I am more proud of the incredible scholars Noah and Sam have become, each with unparalleled work ethic and tremendous drive to succeed.

Abstract

School boards and superintendents play an important role, providing oversight of the educational services for students in a community. This study sought to understand how public school boards govern a district with their respective superintendents, including if and how this may be evolving. Through this research, I wanted to contribute to the discussion around effective school district governance and management with modernized challenges including an increased focus on social and community cultural issues and the post-pandemic era.

This qualitative study involved interviews with ten school board members currently serving in districts from the Southwest Twin Cities area. Findings indicate the following themes: (a) public school board members are concerned about what they perceive as a negative political environment, yet they are uncertain what that means for the future of the public school board, (b) board members learn their roles and responsibilities from a professional organization and from other board members, (c) school board members are often motivated to run after being encouraged by others and a desire to make a positive impact, (d) effective board members are prepared for meetings and keep student interests first, board members measure their own effectiveness from the feedback of others, and (e) productive working relationships with school board members are established through honesty, transparency, and trust.

Based on the findings from this study, recommendations are made for superintendents, school board leaders, board members, and district administrators. Recommendations include that school board members should receive training related to working in political environments, review methods for measuring effectiveness, and invest time in developing trust with other school board members and the superintendent. Additionally, future research should include

reviewing the impact of politics and the political environment on public schools and the future model of the public school board.

Keywords:

Public School Board, School Governance, Superintendent, School Mission, Turnover

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Chapter One: Introduction

Introduction

In the fall of 2014, numerous Minnesota public school districts held elections for open positions on their school boards (Ballotpedia, n.d.a). One candidate in a rural Minnesota district was running for school board and had acknowledged they were open enrolling their children into a neighboring public school district. Open enrollment means a family has chosen to send their children to a public school district outside of the one assigned based on their home address and established school district boundaries (Minnesota Department of Education, n.d.). When potential voters asked this candidate why they were running for a position on the school board in a district deemed not good enough for their children, the candidate responded in a way that surprised and upset many in the community. Their response was that not only was the district not good enough for their children, but the district was not good enough for anyone's children. Whether this candidate brought forward a message that was shared by several others in the community, the fact that there were only five candidates vying for four open positions on the school board, or one of many other possible reasons, this candidate was eventually elected to the school board (Office of Minnesota Secretary of State, n.d.).

My personal and professional journey as an educator and leader has numerous stops along the way, including service as a teacher, principal, assistant superintendent, and superintendent. While I currently serve as a public school district superintendent, my journey earlier in my career as a superintendent led me to depart education for a job outside of the public education sector. While there are many reasons for such a decision, one factor was an inability to satisfy or manage a specific school board member who appeared more motivated by past grievances and a desire for authority over others than a desire to help the public school district

provide quality education services for the community. After I made a challenging decision related to disciplinary action for a specific employee, the board member called my cell phone seven times in 30 minutes, trying to influence change to the decision. During another span of time covering a single week, the board member texted me over 140 times. Numerous pleas were made by the board member to fire employees based on past grievances or make decisions based on the demands of individuals rather than the majority vote of the school board as the governing body. Further, the board member seemed uninterested in an open discussion about working together to define our respective roles or find ways to better work together.

The local public school district governed by a community-elected board of directors has existed for over 200 years (Danzberger, 1994; Hess & Meeks, 2010; Land, 2002). In this dissertation, I examine the governance, management model and function of public school district boards. As a superintendent I sought to learn more so as to better understand and explain how school boards and superintendents work together to ensure their school district is performing at the highest possible level while providing important educational services for the students in the community.

Statement of the Puzzle

The modern and increasingly volatile political environment has resulted in a significant turnover of public school district board members and superintendents (Pendharkar, 2022; Sawchuk, 2022). Before the COVID-19 pandemic or the advent of passionately debating social justice issues in the public arena, school boards more commonly focused on traditional issues of policy development, budgets, capital needs, and curriculum (Mahoney et al., 2022). However, in observing recent school board elections Shockman (2022) described the hotly contested races for open school board positions that were dominated by issues ranging from past COVID mitigation

strategies to the teaching of critical race theory, and opposing political interest groups are entering the picture to endorse candidates. This shift leaves current and future educational leaders to wonder how this evolution occurred, where this will lead, and what can be done.

As a Minnesota superintendent I observe school board elections, including this past year which resulted in many new members of school boards serving Minnesota public schools. In my observation the results yielded candidates with varied perspectives, motivations, and ideologies, and I wondered how members came to learn and perform their specific roles and responsibilities. While these governing bodies may still be faced with the pandemic response and social justice issues, the traditional issues facing the board remain. To be most effective and maximize their performance, school boards should engage in training and development (Ford & Ihrke, 2017a). Historically, all Minnesota school board members have access to leadership and governance training, including training from the organization the Minnesota School Boards Association (MSBA, n.d.b). In Minnesota, the MSBA is required to offer training to school board members related to school finance, though this is the only training that is required (Boards of Independent School Districts, 2022). However, despite similar access to training the effectiveness of these governing bodies remains varied from district to district (Feuerstein, 2009). Given the different reasons new members may have been seeking these roles, it further led to a desire to understand how members learn and perform their roles and what, if any, evolution of the governance and operation model of the school board is occurring.

Study Purpose

The purpose of this study was to understand how public school district boards govern a district with their respective superintendents, including if and how this may be evolving. Further, I wanted to investigate and develop an understanding of what motivated one to run for the public

school board, how school board members came to learn their specific roles, and what experiences and professional development might support creating more effective organizational relationships between school boards and their superintendent. The purpose was to understand and offer strategies to enhance the effectiveness of public school governance. I also intend to use this understanding to help superintendents, school board leaders, board members, and district administrators learn strategies that support school boards and superintendents in working together so as to maximize the effectiveness of the system to achieve their ultimate goal of improving student achievement.

Significance of the Study

Public school district boards face many difficult and often unpopular decisions. These decisions became evident in the past few years during the COVID-19 pandemic or the increased conversations surrounding issues including race, gender identity and expression, and equity in school settings (Mahoney et al., 2022). This study sought to build knowledge and add to the conversation of effective school board governance in light of these most recent events and shed new light on the evolving nature of the public school board. Through this study, I hope to contribute to the creation of a better understanding of how public school district boards can effectively perform their roles and responsibilities, including the work with their respective superintendents.

As a leader in education, I firmly believe in the important role that the public school board and superintendent have in a community as their decisions and leadership impact the community in which they serve. The effectiveness of the board and superintendent performing their duties has an impact on public school success (Feuerstein, 2009; Ford & Ihrke, 2017; Frankenberg & Diem, 2012). This study will contribute by leading to a greater understanding of

effective leadership of the school board working with their superintendent, particularly in light of modern challenges that face school districts. Further, by studying school board members currently serving in districts with a student enrollment between 4,000 and 11,000 students from Minnesota's Southwest Twin Cities area, I hope to better highlight ways that public school district board members can effectively perform their roles and responsibilities in partnership with their superintendent to achieve the mission of the school district.

Research Questions

Through this qualitative research approach, I wanted to understand public school board members currently serving in districts with a student enrollment between 4,000 and 11,000 students from Minnesota's Southwest Twin Cities area as it relates to roles and responsibilities to effectively perform their role, including the work with their superintendent. I wanted to investigate what motivated someone to run for the public school board, how school board members came to learn their specific roles and responsibilities, how they described their effectiveness, and any future needs or trends impacting their purpose and roles. There existed four primary research questions to guide this qualitative study:

RQ1. How do public school board members describe their initial motivation to run for or seek an elected position on the public school board?

RQ2. How do public school board members describe their roles and responsibilities in the public school system, and how do they come to understand their roles and responsibilities in the public school system?

RQ3. How do public school board members view their own effectiveness in performing their roles and responsibilities?

RQ4. How do public school board members describe the future needs, trends, and

purpose of their roles in public school board governance?

These questions have been answered in a qualitative case study, utilizing interviews with members of a public school board and their respective superintendents.

Research Site/Context and Participants

This study was a qualitative case study involving interviews with school board members from Minnesota's Southwest Twin Cities area. The study was also designed as phenomenological research that sought to understand the common experiences of public school board members (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Excluding Minneapolis and St. Paul Public School Districts, there are 54 school districts in the Twin Cities metropolitan area (Minnesota Department of Education, n.d.). This design supported understanding the lived experiences of individuals who shared the common phenomenon through the process of running for, being elected to, and serving on a Southwest Twin Cities public school board. Findings benefit both suburban districts and public school districts throughout the state.

The participants for the study were 10 currently serving members of school boards in districts with a student enrollment between 4,000 and 11,000 students from the Southwest Twin Cities area in Minnesota. Because this study involved working to understand the motivations and experiences of the public school board members, it therefore involved semi-structured interviews with participants. While there was a predetermined script of research questions, open dialogue and follow-up questions permitted additional collection of information from participants. Discussion in these interviews enabled me to understand participants' perspectives and experiences in context, asking relevant questions and follow-up questions including asking for more detailed explanations or specific examples while also paraphrasing to ensure my

understanding as the researcher. The results were analyzed using coding to discover common themes from the experiences of school board candidates as they related to the research questions.

Overview of Previous Research

The model of having the local public school district governed by a community-elected board of directors has been around for more than 200 years (Danzberger, 1994; Hess & Meeks, 2010; Land, 2002). That said, modern challenges have changed the face of these governing bodies and challenged them in new ways (Mahoney et al., 2022). This study aimed to contribute to the body of research surrounding the public school board as it relates to the roles and responsibilities. To explore this matter in more detail I identified three main bodies of literature to be further explored and explained in Chapter 2.

The first body of literature researched the purpose and role of the school district board and superintendent, as well as the emerging trends that may challenge the work of the school board and superintendent. Research scholars describe the role of the public school district board as providing big-picture governance for a public school district which includes supervising the superintendent to manage the day-to-day operations of the district (Danzberger, 1994; Devarics & O'Brien, 2019; MSBA, 2017). After explaining these roles, the section also describes how factors, including responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and issues related to social justice, are challenging those roles and responsibilities, making it more difficult to govern and manage the public school system.

The second body of literature researched how the success of the school board is measured. Relationships between school board members and between board members and the superintendent are important for the school system's success (Hess, 2002; Land, 2002; Weiler, 2015; Worner, 2010). Additionally, effective boards demonstrate the ability to establish and

monitor specific measures of success around shared vision and goals, assessments of student achievement, and monitoring of fiscal responsibilities (Campbell & Green, 1994; Devarics & O'Brien, 2019; Ford & Ihrke, 2017b; Hess & Meeks, 2010, NSBA, 2021).

The final body researched how research scholars and educational leaders describe the importance of school board training and development as a way to understand and perform their roles. While there are numerous means available for members of the public school district board to come to know and understand their roles and responsibilities, for school board members in Minnesota, the only required training is related to school finance and management (Boards of Independent School Districts, 2022). Some research scholars, including Mitchell (2020) and Roberts & Sampson (2010), outline the importance of school board members participating in training and development. However, there are mixed results from other research scholars and educational leaders as to the actual impact on the performance of the public school board members.

Conceptual Framework

This qualitative case study analyzed data gathered from interviewing members of school boards currently serving in districts with a student enrollment between 4,000 and 11,000 students from the Southwest Twin Cities area in Minnesota. Interviewing candidates to collect data was selected as this method supports understanding the point of view and lived experience of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maxwell, 2013). This was also a phenomenological study, meaning its purpose was to understand the points of view of participants with shared experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In summary, interviews were used to understand the viewpoints and lived experiences of public school district board members who shared the common experience of running for and serving on a public school district board.

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured style to provide flexibility to all the participants to express their ideas and beliefs and for the researcher to allow the information to flow naturally in whatever direction it leads. One-to-one interviews with 10 school board members currently serving in districts with a student enrollment between 4,000 and 11,000 students from the Southwest Twin Cities area in Minnesota were up to 60 minutes in length and were conducted and recorded using the Zoom video-based platform. Data analysis involved creating transcripts of each interview and using the transcripts to code data to determine themes and patterns within the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Definition of Terms

Governance: The process of creating rules, establishing policies, and setting budgets (Boards of Independent School Districts, 2022; Minnesota School Boards Association, 2020).

Intermediate School District: A district formed to provide cooperative programs for special education, vocational education, secondary education, or other services (Intermediate School Districts, 2022).

Public School District: A unit responsible for administering the public education system in a geographic area (Ballotpedia, n.d.a).

Roles and Responsibility of the School Board: The duties of a public school board to perform the tasks associated with governance and control of the independent school district (Boards of Independent School Districts, 2022).

School Board: In Minnesota, this body of members provides for the control of the district by electing six to seven members to form the board of directors responsible for governing the public school district (Boards of Independent School Districts, 2022).

Superintendent: The chief executive officer responsible for the management of the operations of the public school district, including the supervision of schools, recommending site improvements, recommending the hiring and dismissal of teachers, evaluating principals, and making reports as required by the commissioner of education (Superintendent, 2022).

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate ways that public school board members in Minnesota can effectively perform their roles and responsibilities in partnership with their superintendent to achieve the mission of the school district. The purpose of the study was also to develop recommendations for strategies for superintendents, school board members, and district administrators to utilize to enhance the effectiveness of the public school district to achieve its ultimate goal of improving student achievement. The research was timely, given the impact of the recent increase in political pressure and political divisions that impact school boards and superintendents (Cohn, 2022; Pendharkar, 2022; Shockman, 2022).

Chapter Two provides a more detailed exploration and review of the literature related to the public school board. Chapter Three will review the research design for this qualitative, phenomenological study.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction

While the model of having the local public school district governed by a community-elected board of directors has been around for more than 200 years, modern challenges have changed the face of these governing bodies and are bringing additional attention to a group that was once considered to be more apolitical in nature (Danzberger, 1994; Hess & Meeks, 2010; Land, 2002). As an example, school boards were forced to make difficult and often unpopular decisions while navigating the safety and education of children during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, public school district boards have recently found themselves at the front of the news cycles as heated speakers at the public forums of their meetings shared opposing opinions in debating how to handle issues like race, gender identity and expression, and equity in school settings (Mahoney et al., 2022).

The role of the public school district board is incredibly complicated, and the effectiveness of how elected school boards govern, and work with their respective superintendent, has an impact on the success of public school district schools (Feuerstein, 2009; Ford & Ihrke, 2017; Frankenberg & Diem, 2012). However, the tension and pressure stemming from COVID-19 mitigating decisions and social issues carried into recent elections for school boards (Pendharkar, 2022; Shockman, 2022). With the change in the political environment, school board elections have increased attention based on varied platforms of candidates and the increase of candidate endorsements by special interest groups for school board elections (Shockman, 2022). This surge in political involvement and attention to school board races makes it even more critical to understand the function of the public school district board.

The purpose of this literature review is to examine how research scholars have understood, and educational leaders have described, the function of the public school district board and superintendent in advancing the mission of a school district. Studies and articles were reviewed to learn how research scholars and educational leaders have described the purpose for, and roles and responsibilities of, school board members and the school superintendent, measuring the success of school boards, and the importance and effectiveness of training and development of school boards.

The Public School District Board

The existing version of the public school district board started more than two centuries ago, intending to have local governing bodies overseeing each local public school system (Land, 2002; Dansberger, 1994). Like other local government entities and boards, the development of a system of local control and authority over the school district was intended to support the ability to meet local populations' unique and specific needs. In the United States, there are approximately 95,000 members of school boards serving roughly 15,000 districts (Land, 2002). However, unlike other public government entities, as oversight for public education evolved into its current format, deliberate efforts were made to keep the governance of the public education system separate from other general forms of government. One reason for this separation was to avoid some of the historical corruption that accompanied the existing political systems (Danzberger, 1994).

The National School Boards Association (NSBA, n.d.) outlined the critical role that local school district boards play in governance and suggested the existing version as the best model for the advancement of public education. The NSBA offered six reasons for the claim:

1. Education is not a line item in a school board's budget—it is the only item.

2. The school board represents the community's voice in public education, providing citizen governance and knowledge of the community's resources and needs, and board members are the policy-makers closest to the student.
3. The school board sets the standard for achievement in the school district, incorporating the community's view of what students should know and be able to accomplish at each grade level.
4. The school board is accessible to everyone in the community and is accountable for the performance of the schools in the district.
5. It is the community member's right as a voter to select new board members who will work diligently to provide an opportunity for students to receive a high-quality education, which will enable them to succeed in their career, college, and life.
6. The school board is the community's education watchdog, ensuring that taxpayers get the most for their tax dollars. (NSBA, n.d.)

The typical school board member is an elected layperson, often with limited experience and background in public education (Land, 2002; Roberts & Sampson, 2010; Sawchuk, 2020; Weiler, 2015). In the state of Minnesota, there are minimal requirements for someone to serve on the school board. As noted by the Minnesota School Boards Association (MSBA), the requirements for election include being 21-years-of -age, eligible to vote, not a convicted sex offender, and a resident of the district for at least thirty days (MSBA, 2020). Given that these are the only formal requirements, it also means there is no prerequisite knowledge or skill necessary to serve on the public school district board. As it pertains to training or professional development to perform the role of a school board member, Minnesota only requires that school board

members receive training in managing school finances (Boards of Independent School Districts, 2022).

Literature Focused on the Purpose for and Role of the School Board and Superintendent

Research scholars and educational leaders used multiple ways to explore and describe the purpose for and role of the school board and superintendent. Further, research scholars and educational leaders attempted to describe many of the evolving challenges both school boards and the superintendent in a public school district face in their work. This section will first focus on how research scholars and educational leaders describe the specific roles and responsibilities of and between the school board and the superintendent. After exploring their respective functions, this section will review how research scholars and leaders describe and report recent issues and complexities that can impact and challenge these roles and responsibilities.

The Purpose and Role of the School Board and Superintendent

At a fundamental level, the school board's purpose is to govern the public school district. In basic terms, governing the district means that the board's role is to create rules, establish policies, and set budgets (Boards of Independent School Districts, 2022; Minnesota School Boards Association, 2020). In Minnesota, the board's purpose is spelled out in law. The Boards of Independent School Districts (2022) described the role of the school board as providing for the control of the district by electing six to seven members to form the board of directors. Minnesota law additionally states that the board's purpose is to create, change, and repeal the district's rules as deemed necessary (Boards of Independent School Districts, 2022).

To understand the role of the school board, one must also take time to more deliberately explore how research scholars and leaders described governance. The Minnesota School Boards Association (MSBA) is a private, nonprofit organization that supports public education,

including providing resources and training to public, private, and charter school districts in Minnesota. The materials and training the MSBA provides are resources to help school boards understand governance and management roles and responsibilities. In describing the basics of governance, the MSBA Board Governance Model states that the school board is to evaluate the effectiveness of the school board, superintendent, and district outcomes; establish broad district expectations, parameters, and a strategic plan; and adopt the policies, budget, and contracts for the district (MSBA, n.d.a).

There are also consulting firms that provide resources for public school districts around the country to understand governance. One such firm, Teamworks International, utilizes a framework they term the Education Leadership System (Teamworks International, 2012), which describes the role of school board governance. Included in their framing of board governance were some similarities to what was offered by the MSBA, such as an expression of the importance of policy development, operational oversight, and strategic planning. Teamworks International also stated, rather directly, their view as to the role of the board in governance and clearly offered that the board alone owns the authority of governance. They went further, stating that the role of the board was to operate by “defining what (results) is to be provided to whom (stakeholders) at what cost (budget and capital)” (Teamworks International, 2012, p. 8). Their materials complemented this description with the use of specific language about the board's role, including oversight, appraisal, and advocacy.

It is important to note that the authority of the public school district board belongs to the group as a governing body, meaning members do not have individual authority (Caruso, 2004; Mitchell, 2020; Weiler, 2015). As most school boards in Minnesota are composed of six to seven members, the authority of the board is based on a minimum of four members agreeing on an

action item to constitute a majority vote on issues before the board (Boards of Independent School Districts, 2022; MSBA, 2020b). This limit of individual authority is important since school boards are intended to govern with the intent of creating rules and decisions for the betterment of the entire school district and community. Keeping that focus on what is best for all can be complicated by numerous factors, including political pressures or the fact that board members are often also parents of children in the school district (Sawchuk, 2020).

One of the significant responsibilities of the public school district board is to employ and supervise the school superintendent who will manage and operate the school district (Land, 2002; Weiler, 2015). The superintendent is the only person who directly reports to the public school district board. School board members are generally elected as laypeople, many with full-time careers outside their board role, and most with limited prior knowledge about the public school system (Land, 2002; Sawchuk, 2020; Weiler, 2015). This limited background makes it unlikely that board members will understand complex educational issues and matters including curriculum selection, teaching pedagogy, and evaluation of education professionals. Therefore, board members rely on superintendents who traditionally have the training and experience for managing the school district (Lindberg & White, 2021; Sawchuk, 2020).

The literature reviewed seemed reasonably consistent in describing the school superintendent's purpose, roles, and responsibilities. The school superintendent is to serve as the chief executive officer for the public school district, and while the school board is to perform governance for the district, the superintendent is responsible for managing the day-to-day operations of the system (Danzberger, 1994; Devarics & O'Brien, 2019; MSBA, 2017). Additionally, the superintendent serves as a de facto, non-voting member of the school board to offer feedback, advice, and counsel to the board on the decisions they face. Minnesota statute

123B.143 Superintendent spells out the requirements for Minnesota districts to employ a school superintendent. This statute listed many of the duties that the superintendent must perform including, but not limited to, supervising of schools, recommending site improvements, recommending the hiring and dismissal of teachers, evaluating principals, and making reports as required by the commissioner of education (Superintendent, 2022).

In providing additional details to describe the role of the superintendent, the MSBA states that the responsibilities of this individual include developing, implementing, and monitoring plans and procedures while also monitoring and developing the staff in support of these ends (MSBA, n.d.). Further, they offered that the school board was to delegate authority to the superintendent to recommend and evaluate all school district staff within the standards established through written school board policies. Where the superintendent is the only employee that is supervised by the school board, all other employees in the school organizational chart report through the superintendent. Teamworks International (2012) offered a broad version for explaining the superintendent's role within the school district's management, including stated responsibilities like management of resources and performance, as well as the implementation of policy through the procedures and practices.

Because the school board traditionally relies on the superintendent to manage and operate the school district, it is clear from the literature that research scholars described one of the major responsibilities of the board as the need to evaluate the effectiveness of the superintendent and hold that individual accountable (Danzberger, 1994; Hess, 2002; Hess & Meeks, 2010; Land, 2002; Lineberg & White, 2021; MSBA, 2020a; NSBA, 2018; Roberts & Sampson, 2010). Holding the superintendent accountable can sometimes result in a challenging relationship since the board can terminate the contract of the superintendent, implying that a superintendent could

be additionally cautious in their work and decisions for fear of losing their position (Lineberg & White, 2021). Beyond that challenge, the process can also be counterproductive if there are not clearly defined and agreed-upon performance expectations and measurements of success (Land, 2002). Therefore, one could argue in favor of the importance for the board to have a clear way to outline the expectations and measures of success for the superintendent and share these with the superintendent and other board members.

One formal option for holding the superintendent accountable, and for providing a clear way to outline expectations, is to use a goals-setting and evaluation framework, like the model provided to Minnesota public school districts by the MSBA (2020a). The MSBA framework for evaluation utilizes a defined process for creating goals, as well as an evaluation rubric with 8 evaluation standard categories, each with 5 to 7 elements for evaluation. The MSBA recommends that school boards and superintendents meet to set and establish goals for the year, check in through a midyear evaluation, and conclude with a year-end summative evaluation meeting (MSBA, 2020a).

Another option for the school board to hold the superintendent accountable in a way that creates objectivity for the review of performance is through what Teamworks International (2012) called monitoring cards or, similarly, what Rue (2022) described as District Effectiveness Reports. Independent of the name and subtle differences, both of these reports were intended to be objective measures based on key priorities and used for accountability. The reports included data and evidence of district progress in areas of high priority for the school district. They are to be presented to the school board periodically so the board is aware of the school district's progress in these priority areas. Examples of topics for accountability reports often include

academic achievement data, budget management, curricular programming, nutrition services, athletics, and fine arts (Rue, 2022).

Other research scholars have also examined factors that school boards should use to evaluate a superintendent. For example, Hess (2002) conducted a survey of school board members in approximately 2,000 school districts. Respondents to the survey reported that the essential factors school boards should use to evaluate a superintendent included the morale of district employees, the safety of students, and the relationship the superintendent has with the school board. In another study, Hess and Meeks (2010) compared and contrasted the perspectives between superintendents and school boards on what each believed should be used to evaluate the superintendent's effectiveness. One of these findings included that superintendents favored factors like financial management, meeting goals, and having effective working relationships as important components of their evaluations. Alternatively, the researchers found that school boards were more likely than superintendents to favor judging the superintendent's performance based on student outcomes.

While not a direct study of the superintendent evaluation process, Ford and Ihrke (2017b) reviewed how Minnesota school boards defined accountability. Their study was conducted by administering an 82-question survey sent to all Minnesota public and charter school board members. The survey had a 21 percent response rate, and the researchers utilized a coding system for the development of themes. The researchers found that school board members defined accountability as being high stakes and involving staff, systems, and student performance (Ford & Ihrke, 2017b). With these as the common definitions of accountability, one could understand how these concepts could impact the criteria used to evaluate the superintendent.

The Issues and Complexities that Challenge the School Board and Superintendent

While current issues have given increased attention to the complexities that impact the roles of the superintendent and school board, challenges have also existed in the past.

Approximately one decade ago, Frankenberg and Diem (2012) studied challenging political environments through a qualitative case study of two school districts in political flux. Their findings demonstrated the potential issues and danger of partisan pressures on the public school board, including impact on policies, unstable superintendent leadership, and community backlash. In illustrating this point, the authors shared the increasingly complex role of school boards “as multiple stakeholders and interest groups have become more influential in the education policy-making process” (Frankenberg & Diem, 2012, p. 118). These comments summarizing how influential groups or individuals impact education policy are also relevant in more recent school board elections.

More recent authors and educational leaders lend credibility and applicability to the observations of Frankenberg and Diem (2012), offering modernized insights into the complexities that interest groups and influential, often partisan voices had on the school board and superintendent. One example of the modern political and partisan pressure faced by public school boards is offered by a review of the decisions of the COVID-19 pandemic. School boards were forced to make numerous decisions, including the implementation of mask mandates or shifting instructional models away from standard in-person learning. These decisions were often met with wildly different opinions that showed the political division within communities (Cohn, 2022). However, the tension and political pressures on school boards and superintendents continued to grow and dominated recent elections for school boards as the political division over

both COVID-19 and social justice issues took center stage in the 2022 election cycle (Pendharkar, 2022; Shockman, 2022). As noted by Cohn (2022):

Adding to the complexity of addressing racial reckoning issues and anti-racism in public schools is a new well-organized and coordinated campaign from conservative media and political advocates to conflate any discussion or embrace of equity with support for critical race theory, a scholarly discipline dating back several decades. (Fraying Board Relations section)

The evidence above made it clear that, in general, there is more attention in recent history on public school district decision-making. Given this attention to school districts, Mahoney et al. (2022) sought to understand school board members' perspectives on COVID-19 response, social-emotional learning, and educational equity. They administered a survey to school board members in the state of Illinois. They analyzed the results of the 61 survey responses and found that issues such as pandemic response and addressing equity in education were identified as divisive issues by the board members. Further, they also found that beyond the contention, board members did not agree on the need for the board to address issues like inequities. The authors introduced discussion about how the role of the school board was potentially changing and evolving with these modern challenges. They suggested that in the post-pandemic, social justice era, issues before the school board had evolved beyond more traditional discussions about the budget, facilities, and curriculum to ones of managing and monitoring efforts to “steer politics away from the governance of schools” (Mahoney et al., 2022, p. 49). This statement seems to imply that board members specifically wanted and desired to avoid political discussions in schools. However, since the authors mentioned that board members disagreed on how to address issues, it may lead one to conclude that the desire to steer clear of politics is not universal among all

members of the board and that some board members may indeed desire to bring politics into the governance of schools.

The beliefs of a school board member on how to address issues are important as are their reasons for running for the board. Their motivations for serving the community in this position will impact how they decide to utilize their authority as a board member (Mountford, 2004). Since some board members run out of a desire to serve and others are motivated because they are angry about a policy or decision, it can be challenging to focus on the big picture and the greater good (Sawchuck, 2020). While school boards are supposed to make decisions based on the good of the entire district, this can be complicated by the hotly contested elections that included candidates endorsed by opposing sources such as teacher unions, special interests, or political action committees (Shockman, 2022). This complexity extends to the ability of the superintendent to conduct their work as well and superintendents report that the political dynamics of schools made it increasingly more difficult to effectively manage the public school system (Starr, 2018).

Capullo (2021) attempted to capture some of how the role of the superintendent had changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Changes described included decisions about student safety, COVID-19 mitigations, and instructional delivery models on top of managing the traditional responsibilities of providing leadership for the community's education. The superintendent should also consistently work to implement the school district's mission, even while the role of the superintendent was no longer just focused on education and academics. The role was also about making often unpopular decisions related to health and safety, frequently by utilizing public health guidance and creating partnerships with social service agencies. As a

result, superintendents and school boards were forced to make decisions on matters outside their usual training and expertise.

With these changing dynamics and increased complexities for superintendents and school boards, one may wonder, similarly to Mahoney et al. (2022), how these roles may be evolving or if we are potentially moving beyond some of the original purposes of the board and superintendent. In this regard, Kogan (2022) argued that the current model for locally governed school districts is ineffective and needs to be reformed, offering that failure to do so will worsen matters. The author stated that the current model was not designed specifically for student achievement and further that the current model may not be structured in a way that has the best interest of students at the forefront. As an example, Kogan cited that school boards are often elected by high concentrations of voters without children in schools, and voters who do not share the same racial and demographic background as the students served in a public school district (Kogan, 2022). Also, two-thirds of incumbent school board members did not seek new terms in the most recent election cycle (Pendharkar, 2022). The multiple factors discussed could lead one to question who is interested in being a school board member, the motivations they have to do so, and the impact they may have on the public school district board. While current leaders and research scholars have helped to frame the issues and complexities that challenge current school boards and superintendents, there exists a gap in the literature outlining the practical ways this may impact the roles and responsibilities that may be evolving and changing.

The exploration of how research scholars and leaders view the purpose and role of the school board and superintendent and the complexities and challenges they face are essential components of the literature. However, it is also critical to explore how school boards are

understood to be successful. The following body of literature will investigate measuring the success of the school board.

Literature Focused on Measuring the Success of the School Board

Research scholars and educational leaders describe the way the success of the public school district board is measured in multiple ways. The emergent themes from the review of this literature have been summarized into two clusters. The first cluster focuses on measuring school board success based on the existence of a positive working relationship among board members, and with the superintendent while performing specific roles. This cluster specifically includes descriptions of how conflict among members has a negative impact on the effectiveness of the board. The second cluster demonstrates how research scholars and leaders attempt to explain the effectiveness of a board in the context of specific outcomes, products, or measures of success.

Relationships, Roles, and Absence of Conflict

An effective public school board develops a positive working relationship between members of the board and between the board and the superintendent (Hess, 2002; Land, 2002; Weiler, 2015; Worner, 2010). This positive rapport is specifically evidenced by the absence of unproductive conflict and by ensuring both the board and superintendent understand and perform specific roles and responsibilities. For its function, the public school board should focus on big-picture priorities, decisions, and goals, but not day-to-day operations or actions that would micromanage the superintendent (Dansberger, 1994; Devarics & O'Brien, 2019; Feuerstein, 2009; Grissom, 2010; Sawchuk, 2020; Weiler, 2015). Further, an effective school board is one that maintains a focus on making decisions in the interest of the greater benefit of the organization rather than a narrow scope of specific political issues or special interests (Grissom, 2010; Sawchuk, 2020; Weiler, 2015).

Board members are tasked with maintaining their focus on the best interest of the organization in their work, as school boards are tasked with making numerous decisions in the school community they serve. Decisions can come with differences of opinion and lead to discussion and debate. In productive and healthy school board environments with high levels of trust, debate can be helpful such that the perceived conflict is rather viewed as a professional exchange of ideas (Lencioni, 2012). Alternatively, conflict that is improperly managed can lead to power struggles that are destructive (Bollman & Deal, 2017).

When the members of a school board engage in conflict that does not parallel a professional exchange of ideas, such conflict can have a negative impact on the overall effectiveness of the school board. Weiler (2015) conducted a study that used multiple means to understand and explain the implications of having conflict on a school board, including contention initiated by a caustic and toxic board member. The study was a qualitative review of a specific public school district where a toxic school board member had been elected and brought significant disruption and division to the board, school district, and community.

To give voice to the issues presented, Weiler (2015) conducted focus groups with people who had close interactions with the disruptive board member. The researcher organized focus groups of other members of the school board and district personnel who themselves had similar interactions with the caustic board member. Participants discussed their perspectives and gave examples from their firsthand experiences. Among the findings, the author pointed out the inefficient use of time necessary to give attention to and deal with the specific toxicity caused by the school board member in question. The author stated it was critical for a school board to develop a positive relationship and rapport between board members themselves and between the board members and their respective superintendents as the time and energy spent dealing with

negativity is unproductive and would be better utilized if instead it is focused on advancing the mission of the school district.

Other research scholars have also sought to understand and explain the impact of the relationship between a school board and their superintendent. In reviewing the results of a quantitative study conducted by Ford and Ihrke (2017a), the authors also provided evidence, similar to Weiler's (2015) study, about the negative impact that conflict has on the effectiveness of a school board. In the study, the researchers administered a nationwide survey to elected school board members, covering 49 states and nearly 5,000 participants. While the findings outlined that conflict among members had a negative impact on the effectiveness of the school board, Ford and Ihrke (2017a) also argued that there was a direct link between school board conflict and a formal measure of school success, namely the rate at which students graduate from high school. In the results of their research, the authors concluded that conflict on a public school board led to a reduction in high school graduation rates. Therefore, avoiding conflict was important for the success of a school board, which could be achieved in part by establishing clear processes and procedures for board members to follow when operating in their roles, making decisions, or debating issues (Ford & Ihrke, 2017a; Weiler, 2015).

In addition to establishing processes and procedures, effective boards can avoid negative and toxic conflict by proactively developing positive relationships among members. In a study conducted in Pennsylvania, Feuerstein (2009) administered a survey to all the school superintendents of the 501 districts in the state to better understand school board effectiveness. Among the findings, the author suggested that effective school boards should make deliberate attempts at "understanding the workings of the district itself and their role in it, developing stronger relationships among board members and with the superintendent, and increasing their

ability to think about school improvement in strategic ways,” (Feuerstein, 2009, p. 20.) These findings outlined the need for purposeful focus on key strategies for effective school boards.

One of the important corollaries from the literature was the increasingly common nature of, and the negative impact of, the influence of politics and special interests on public school boards (Dansberger, 1994; Grissom, 2010; Sawchuk, 2020; Weiler, 2015). The influence of politics and special interests could increase conflict, and conflict has been a clear and common thread as research scholars and leaders described ineffective school boards. Public school boards are often faced with difficult and unpopular decisions. Influential groups, and people with power and authority, can have a negative impact on school boards when they advocate for self-interests or specific and narrow political positions (Grissom, 2010). Decisions made by the public school board should be made in the interest of the betterment of the entire district, not the narrow views and perspectives of these political enclaves (Grissom, 2010; Sawchuk, 2020; Weiler, 2015).

Following a study of school board members in the state of California, Grissom (2010) offered insights into how the effectiveness of school board performance is impacted by both school board conflict and special interest groups. The researcher administered a stratified sample survey (stratified by size and chosen randomly) to school board members. Approximately 140 school board members participated out of a pool of 975 members statewide. The author referenced themes from studies related to the negative impact that board conflict had on the board's effectiveness, as well as the negative impact of school-board micromanagement of school operations. The research findings also outlined the negative impact that special interest groups can have on the school board, including the significant negative impact of the engagement of unions. Grissom specifically stated that union involvement in school board elections led to an increased disagreement and division among board members, which therefore had an overall

detrimental impact on the ability of the school board to function effectively. Similar to Feuerstein (2009), Grissom (2010) opined that school boards could mitigate factors that result in conflict, including by taking steps to ensure the development of a shared vision with goal setting, as well as by establishing structures like creating processes and procedures for how to make decisions or engage in discussion and debate.

Shared Vision, Student Achievement, Fiscal Responsibility

Some research scholars also viewed the effectiveness of a public school board by the ability of the board to establish and monitor specific priorities and measures of success. Such measures of success often included the creation of a shared vision and goals, assessments of student achievement, and monitoring of fiscal responsibilities (Campbell & Green, 1994; Devarics & O'Brien, 2019; Ford & Ihrke, 2017b; Hess & Meeks, 2010, NSBA, 2021).

As the governing body of the public school district, one of the primary responsibilities of the district is to help set the direction of the schools by establishing policy, priorities, and vision. Research scholars have particularly focused on the establishment of vision as a necessary measure of the success of the school board (Campbell & Green, 1994; Devarics & O'Brien, 2019). The work of Devarics and O'Brien (2019) included a review of multiple studies to understand specific characteristics for effective school board operation. The researchers reviewed case studies and meta-analyses with a focus on the practices of school boards, with comparisons for districts with similar populations but significantly different measures of effectiveness. They found that school boards that focused on creating a vision based on student achievement were generally higher functioning than those that did not. Campbell and Greene (1994) offered a similar assessment of the importance of creating a vision as they stated, "of all the roles and responsibilities of school boards, none is more central to the purpose of local

governance than ensuring that long-term vision is established for the school system” (p. 393). In short, it is the responsibility of the board to establish and monitor the vision and the responsibility of the administration and staff to operationalize the vision into the day-to-day functions of the district. Therefore, to be effective, a vision created by the board and for the district needs to be clear, practical, and manageable so that the staff within the district can understand the vision, create goals, create measures for success, and connect them all the way to the classroom level specifically to impact student achievement (Devarics & O’Brien, 2019).

While public education has been around for more than two centuries, one could still consider it to be a relatively new expectation that schools and districts measure success based on the academic success of their students. In other words, it is a comparatively modern approach to actually consider measuring the success of a school district and the school board by monitoring student outcomes like standardized assessments or graduation rates. Hess and Meeks (2010) investigated and found the increased nature of public school accountability and the impact of the No Child Left Behind Act pushed the desire to use student achievement, notably standardized assessments, as a measure of success. To evaluate the emphasis on standardized assessment scores, these researchers administered a survey to a stratified sample of school boards and superintendents drawn from a database from the National School Board Association. Through this study of both superintendents and school boards, Hess and Meeks (2010) found that even though performance on standardized assessments was important, most school boards reported that it was insufficient to define school success solely by student achievement. While needing context and perspective, assessments of student achievement were still a significant factor in measuring the success of a school district and board (Hess & Meeks, 2010; Ford & Ihrke, 2017b).

When establishing the priorities and vision for a school district, it is important for the board to make decisions about the resources allocated to support them. The priorities of a school district can be found in how that district spends its funds. Public education has one of the largest, if not the largest, portions of funding allocations from state and local government (Ford & Ihrke, 2017b). In the study conducted by Hess and Meeks (2010), 95% of responding superintendents reported that measuring the effectiveness of a school board should include financial management as a factor. Campbell and Green (1994) explained the importance of financial management, which was one factor under the control of the public school board, calling it the most important policy document the district had, pointing out that the priorities of the district are demonstrated in how financial resources were allocated.

The COVID-19 pandemic created an environment with regularly forming and changing priorities, which increased the need for school boards to engage in fiscally responsible management of the budget. As noted by the National School Boards Association (NSBA, 2021), the pandemic served to amplify inequities and financial difficulties that were already in school districts and added new complexities, including those related to facilities and technology. While the need to budget based on limited resources is not new, the pandemic crisis created an environment where school boards should prioritize based on changing needs, including the need to make reductions or adjustments to people, programs, and facilities.

Exploration of how research scholars and leaders view the ways to measure the success of a school board is an important component of the literature. That said, it is also important to explore the means by which school boards go about learning to be effective and perform their roles. The next body of literature will investigate options and methods for helping boards learn their roles.

Literature Focused on the Effectiveness of Training and Development for School Boards

For the state of Minnesota, formal requirements for school board professional development are minimal, and the only language in Minnesota law that actually requires school board training references that board members must receive training in school finance and management (Boards of Independent School Districts, 2022). Research scholars and educational leaders generally described board training and development as important in ensuring a successful school board. However, some disagreement exists about how direct a link there is between training and development and actual measurement or evidence of school board success. In the review of this section of literature, emergent themes related to school board training and development are clustered into two general categories. The first cluster demonstrates how research scholars and leaders described the types of professional development available to Minnesota School Board members, which includes formal training options through professional organizations or consults and informal training methods through the superintendent and mentors. The second cluster focuses on the broad impact of school board training and development on the school board's performance. This cluster includes how research scholars have generally argued in favor of school board development and have offered insights to describe measurements of effectiveness, or lack thereof, that result from training.

Types of Professional Development Available to Minnesota School Board Members

As research scholars and education leaders described how school boards receive training and development, they included opportunities provided by consulting firms or offered by professional organizations like the Minnesota School Boards Association (MSBA). The MSBA (n.d.b) offers numerous opportunities for training and development for school boards, which includes four phases of general training for all members. The topics of these four phases included

the basics of being a board member, understanding school finance, improving overall board performance, and engaging with policy and community. Additionally, they described specific training options for board officers, including the school board chair, clerk, and treasurer, to help these formalized positions within the school board better understand their unique roles and responsibilities within the functions of the public school district board. There are also periodic opportunities for board learning on specific tasks, including how to conduct contract negotiations, hire and evaluate superintendents, and facilitate board self-evaluation.

The school superintendent can also impact the professional development of the school board, particularly as new members come onto the board after an election cycle. Some research scholars argued that the superintendent should take a hands-on approach to support new board members by quickly arranging for training after they are elected (Caruso, 2004, McAdams, 2003). While the superintendent can help lead, they would not do this alone. McAdams (2003) stated that the superintendent can subtly push board members to attend professional learning opportunities by using their influence and working with existing board leadership, to help school boards understand the importance of the training and by emphasizing the critical nature of the learning experiences. While some training can be formalized and provided to districts by state associations and consultants, superintendents can also spend time on local practices and topics, including the district's strategic plan (Caruso, 2004). Offering advice in situations where a school board may utilize a consultant, McAdams (2003) offered it is important that the team attempts to capture outcomes and agreements in writing, which can be a critical way to support follow-up and accountability to honor the commitments made.

Referencing a study of 1,600 board members, Mitchell (2020) shared that only 20% of respondents to a survey questionnaire reported they felt very prepared to serve on the school

board in the early months of their terms. With such a small percentage feeling confident in the early stages of this important role, the author shared that superintendents would be wise to develop new board members early in their terms. As a result, mentoring was suggested as a potential solution for onboarding new board members. Mentoring is stated as a way to help new members understand traditional things like the formal and technical aspects of school board responsibilities. However, mentoring could also provide historical and instructional knowledge to new board members that are not typically a part of more formal and standard training and materials (Mitchell, 2020).

The MSBA (2016) also made a compelling argument in favor of engaging new school board members in mentoring. As there is a great deal for new board members to learn about their roles and responsibilities, there is certainly a steep learning curve for newly elected members. The role of the mentor, an experienced member of the school board, is to help localize the orientation and ensure a smooth entry and transition for the mentee or newly elected board member. The MSBA also shared some specific materials and checklists that assigned mentors could utilize to onboard mentees and made it clear that ongoing personal interactions were important for both the mentor and the superintendent in this process (MSBA, 2016).

The Impact of School Board Training and Development on Board Performance

While numerous options exist for school board members to learn how to do their work, gaining an understanding of how training impacts the school board's performance is also important. In making their case for the importance of having school board members engage in training and development, many research scholars pointed out the inexperience and lack of formal background that the typical school board member had concerning matters of public education (Land, 2002; Roberts & Sampson, 2010; Sawchuk, 2020; Weiler, 2015). Using this

lack of knowledge as a baseline, some research scholars argued that school board training and development was important for their effectiveness simply as a matter of logic and reasonableness. Campbell and Green (1994) stated that it would be unreasonable and unfair to assume that newly elected board members were prepared to fully understand all of their roles once elected. Roberts and Sampson (2010) wrote, “It would seem reasonable that elected people and who hire-fire superintendents would want some required training in school district law, governance, and finance” (p. 709). In the public school system, licensed staff members are required to engage in professional development and receive continuing education credits. Therefore, it should also seem appropriate that some leadership programming and development would also be completed by school boards making decisions (Mitchell, 2020; Roberts & Sampson, 2010).

While logical in scope, there were additional observations that research scholars and educational leaders made beyond arguments related to the general reasonableness of training and development for school boards. There was also disagreement in understanding the actual, measurable performance improvement that could be attributed to training and development. To better understand the importance of training and development for board members, Roberts and Sampson (2010) administered a survey questionnaire to the directors of all state school board associations. 26 of 50 association directors responded to the survey. The researchers sought to understand what the association directors believed to be the impact that professional training of school board members had on actual measures of student achievement in the district. Though only 31% of the respondents reported that their state required any professional development for school board members, every respondent with those requirements reported they believed in the existence of a direct link between board development and training and increased student

achievement. The survey findings demonstrated that school board association directors believed in a connection between school board training on student achievement, but the study findings did not support that direct link. The researchers concluded that “there seems to be a dearth of hard evidence and research about how professional development of school boards members’ affects student achievement” (Roberts & Sampson, 2010, p. 709). This study demonstrated there existed a disconnect between what directors believed to be the impact of school board learning and the actual evidence to support that belief.

In a study conducted by Ford and Ihrke (2017a), more than 5,000 public and nonprofit charter school board members in Minnesota responded to an 89-question survey. The researchers intended to use the study to understand how Minnesota public and charter school boards engaged in training and development activities and attempted to compare and contrast how boards prioritized these opportunities. As part of their initial discussion, the researchers offered that the critical nature of the work of the public school district board, combined with education being among the most expensive functions of government, made it imperative that board members engage in training and development activities. Further, the authors offered that effective public and private education governing boards needed to invest in their own professional learning. However, their research also concluded the lack of evidence with a direct connection to positive or negative outcomes of engagement in professional learning. They stated that they “did not find, however, that board dysfunction was a cause of the significant difference in the extent to which the boards engage in board development activities” (p. 149). Some board members tended to resist engaging in professional learning. In this study, the researchers provided their insights and conjecture on why some elected board members may resist professional development, having

offered that some may run for the school board purposefully in opposition to the status quo of standard board decision-making.

While the literature speaks to the means available for school boards to be trained, some debate exists about how school board training leads to effective school board governance. It makes sense that training for school boards is essential so new members can understand the critical tasks for which they are responsible. However, much of the research related to school board training and development is quantitative and does not provide the perspectives of public school district board members in context. Understanding this in context is particularly important considering more modern challenges that public school district boards face, like the pandemic response and the increased debate related to social issues (Mahoney et al., 2022).

Conclusion

The literature review included exploring the role of the school board in governing the school district and the role of the superintendent in managing the day-to-day operations. The literature also explored how authors suggest that these roles may be evolving due to some of the modern political environments and recent issues faced by the public school district board. The literature review further explored the different ways research scholars and leaders understand and explain how to measure the success of school boards. These success measures included the existence of a positive working relationship between board members and the superintendent and also more formalized measures like student achievement and fiscal responsibility. Lastly, the review included the importance and effectiveness of training and development of school boards by understanding the available development options and the debate on the impact of training and development on the board members.

Educational leaders and research scholars offer that recent debates on how school districts responded to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and how districts manage social issues are bringing recent attention to school board decision-making (Pendharkar, 2022; Shockman, 2022). With the most recent school board elections, this new attention potentially motivated candidates differently than in previous election cycles for open board positions. What is unclear from the literature is how these more recent issues could practically impact the public school district board and its purpose. As the issues facing school board members evolve, it becomes even more important to better study and more clearly understand the potential impact these issues have on the school board. Additionally, much of the existing literature is quantitative. It is also essential to understand the school boards in context, particularly since the current issues cited have potentially impacted the conditions in which the school boards function. Context also matters in understanding what motivates one to run for the public school district board and how it can impact their understanding of the public school board.

This study seeks to add to the literature by better understanding the modern school board in context. The study further aims to accomplish this by exploring what motivates someone to run for the public school district board; how school board members come to learn their specific roles and responsibilities; how board members view their effectiveness in performing their roles and responsibilities; and how public school district board members describe the future of public school governance.

Chapter Two provided an exploration and review of the literature related to the public school board. Chapter Three will review the research design for this qualitative, phenomenological study including an overview of the general design of the research and the methodology research overview, data collection, data analysis, and quality research criteria.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Part I: Introduction to Research Methods

Introduction

Public school district boards face a multitude of challenges in serving their communities. They are charged with governing their local districts in the task of educating students. The work of the public school district board is difficult and complex, and the main focus is to improve student learning and monitor evidence of academic achievement. This reality illustrates the importance of school boards in each community and the impact boards have on the education of students (Ford & Ihrke, 2017). The work of a school board is not static, and members must be prepared to adapt to evolving challenges and competing interests.

Also critical in the face of these challenges is the relationship between the public school board and the school district superintendent. While the public district school boards govern the district, they employ the superintendent as the chief executive officer responsible for the day-to-day management and operations of the school district. Failure of either to properly perform their roles productively can lead to conflict between board members, between the board and superintendent, or between the board and the community. This conflict can result in poor performance in the district (Dervarics & O'Brien, 2019; Ford & Ihrke, 2017; Frankenberg & Diem, 2012; Weiler, 2015). School districts cannot afford these negative impacts on the students and families they serve.

This phenomenological research study aimed to understand and describe the potentially evolving role of the public school board in districts with a student enrollment between 4,000 and 11,000 students from the Southwest Twin Cities area. I hope that by understanding these dynamics, I can help highlight and explain the increasingly complex role of the public school

district board and the important role that the school board and superintendent play in their respective communities.

Research Design Overview

This qualitative case study analyzed data gathered from interviewing members of public school boards currently serving in districts with a student enrollment between 4,000 and 11,000 students from the Southwest Twin Cities area in Minnesota. Conducting interviews with participants was suited to this study as the interviews permitted the ability to understand the participants' points of view, their lived experiences, and their view of the world (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured style to provide flexibility to all the participants to express their ideas and beliefs and for the researcher to allow the information to flow naturally in whatever direction it leads.

There exist four primary research questions:

RQ1. How do public school board members describe their initial motivation to run for or seek an elected position on the public school board?

RQ2. How do public school board members describe their roles and responsibilities in the public school system, and how do they come to understand their roles and responsibilities in the public school system?

RQ3. How do public school board members view their own effectiveness in performing their roles and responsibilities?

RQ4. How do public school board members describe the future needs, trends, and purpose of their roles in public school board governance?

Positionality

I am a public school superintendent with several years of experience in public education leadership positions. As a result, I have firsthand experience in roles and responsibilities related to the public school board. I have also attended multiple training sessions provided to school boards and superintendents, including those provided by the Minnesota School Board Association (MSBA, 2017) and Teamworks International (2012). The participants for this study were school board members currently serving in districts with a student enrollment between 4,000 and 11,000 students from the Southwest Twin Cities area in Minnesota. As such, numerous participants served in districts close to the current district in which I work.

I was the primary researcher conducting the interviews and analyzing the results. My experiences in numerous settings offer perspectives about public school boards and superintendents. These experiences were used to relate to participants and also enabled me to more comfortably and knowledgeably ask follow-up questions and press participants for additional details. That said, I understood that my involvement could also have introduced potential bias from my personal service and understanding as a superintendent, including my current position as a Minnesota superintendent. These factors could have also impacted how board members described their lived experiences to me. This potential concern underscored the important step of developing rapport with participants as part of the study. My guiding ethical principles and data collection methods add specific details and actions that were important ways to mitigate these factors.

Guiding Ethical Principles

When entering this qualitative study of the public school board, I needed to examine ethical considerations. These considerations included the need to adhere to the required

principles for conducting research outlined in federal regulations and also stemmed from a desire to ensure that the study results are trustworthy (Rossman & Rallis, 2010). Rossman and Rallis (2010) defined trustworthiness as a composition "of both competent practice and ethical considerations for the participants" (Rossman & Rallis, 2010, p. 383). Both competence and ethical considerations were critical aspects as I completed my research.

Confidentiality

As the participants were elected public officials, there were risks to their involvement, including political fallout. For example, if a board member's honest viewpoints and opinions are unpopular and made public, it could negatively impact their relationships with their board or community. This risk necessitated that I deliberately maintained confidentiality during this process. Maintaining confidentiality included ensuring control over the data and giving purposeful consideration to confidentiality when reporting the data. To protect participants, their names were kept separate from the data collected, utilizing a numbering system to ensure anonymity. Further, reported data utilized generic participant letter name identifiers to protect the identity of the participants.

Reflexivity

While my experiences working with school boards as a public school administrator afforded me considerable knowledge and insights that are an advantage to this qualitative study, I also needed to be mindful of possible bias from those experiences and my personal values and ethics (Somekh & Lewin, 2011). In this regard, I utilized a process known as reflexivity, which Guillemin and Gillam (2004) wrote is "a continuous process of critical scrutiny and interpretation, not just concerning the research methods and the data, but also to the researcher, participants, and the research context," (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p.275). Lutrell (2019) also

argued that reflexivity is important during both the research process as well as during the writing process.

Regarding the research process, I monitored my own self-awareness to ensure my questions, history, and responses did not impact or manipulate the interviews. Throughout the video-based interviews, I was very deliberate in monitoring my reactions to the responses of participants so as not to influence the results. Each recorded interview was also reviewed with the drafted transcript to verify the accuracy of the transcript in both what was shared and the context surrounding statements made by participants. Additionally, as responses were coded from transcripts, they were verified multiple times for accuracy. Using the reflexivity process meant I deliberately worked to discover and report findings as they emerged, ensuring that results or conclusions were not consciously or unconsciously ignored because they did not fit my personal narrative (Lutrell, 2019).

Member checking

One final step in this process, which connects to reflexivity, was utilizing member checking as part of my research. The member-checking process tested the interpretations and conclusions of those from whom the data was collected (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, n.d.). In this case, member checking took place during interviews by asking for confirmation or clarity of responses, working to ensure I did not immediately make assumptions, fill gaps, or draw conclusions on my own. Further, following the interviews and after the transcripts were created, all participants were offered the opportunity to review the transcripts. Additionally, four of the participants were contacted to specifically confirm sections of the transcript in order to confirm their opinions and perspectives were captured accurately.

Part II: Data Collection Steps

Sampling

The population of interest included members of public school boards currently serving in districts with a student enrollment between 4,000 and 11,000 students from the Southwest Twin Cities area in Minnesota. The participants of this study included board members with the shared experience of belonging to the same metropolitan area intermediate district, which was composed of up to 17 different independent districts. As each Independent School District has either 6 or 7 members on their respective boards, and the selected districts were narrowed to those serving 4,000 to 11,000 students, the population for the study was approximately 50 school board members.

All population members were invited to participate through a recruitment email. The communication asked those interested in participating in the study to notify me by a specified deadline. Once the window to recruit participants was closed, representation from different districts was selected for the study to ensure multiple perspectives and backgrounds existed, including but not limited to gender, district location, and board member years of experience.

Recruitment

For this study, participants were recruited by sending an invitation via email (see Appendix 1) to all school board members from districts serving 4,000 to 11,000 students within the selected Minnesota Intermediate School District. The communication included a statement of purpose, relevant information about the study, and an explanation of informed consent. As the participants for the study were all members of a public school district board and had voluntarily chosen to serve the community, the hope was that additional incentives were not necessary and

that selected participants would be willing to participate as a means to share their personal experiences and journey to this elected position.

The invitation to participate (see Appendix 1) included a statement of purpose for the study. Specifically, potential participants were informed that while the model for how public schools have been governed has been around for more than 200 years, with modern challenges that communities face, there was a desire to understand the potentially changing role of the school board. It also stated my desire as the researcher to highlight the increasingly demanding and complex role the school board plays in the community.

The recruitment letter included information about why the participant had been selected, a brief description of the time commitment, and the limited personal potential risks and benefits of the study. The invitation included information as to the valuable nature of the potential study and my desire to use the insights to inform future practice, policy, and scholarship. Lastly, the invitation included a clear statement of the voluntary nature of participation in the study and concluded with a statement of consent should the board member accept the invitation to participate in the study.

Within one week after the initial invitation email was sent to the school board members from the selected population, six had agreed to participate in the study, though one later withdrew their interest. After waiting one week, a second email was sent to the same group, thanking those who had agreed to participate and noting that I was still looking for additional participants. Table 1 below identifies participants' gender and years of experience on their respective school boards.

Table 1*Gender and Experience of Participants*

Participant	Gender	Years on school board
Participant A	F	10
Participant B	M	< 1
Participant C	F	3
Participant D	F	< 1
Participant E	F	5
Participant F	M	5
Participant G	M	3
Participant H	F	< 1
Participant I	F	5
Participant J	M	7

Consent Process

My study involved observations of and interviews with human subjects. Therefore, I needed to be mindful of following appropriate procedures to ensure informed consent was included. Somekh and Lewin (2011) describe several factors related to informed consent that were relevant to my study. First, participants were informed of the study's purpose and any potential consequences they could experience from participating. Additionally, since my research was a case study of public school board members, I needed to be mindful to acquire informed consent from each participant, not just a designated individual with authority, like the school district superintendent or chair of the school board.

Within the letter to recruit participants for the study (see Appendix 1), each recipient was informed that participation was voluntary and was further informed of the purpose of the study, the known risks, the methods that would be used to protect their confidentiality, and the expected benefits of the study (Creswell, 2018). The letter informed candidates for participation that the interviews would be recorded to support ensuring all information was gathered in the process. Participants were asked to sign the informed consent form (see Appendix 2), indicating their willingness to participate and acknowledge they are at least 18 years of age. Since this study is of public school board members in the state of Minnesota, which requires candidates for election to be at least 21 years of age (MSBA, 2020), all candidates selected were already at least 18 at the time of selection. As a final step, at the start of each interview, I reiterated the informed consent information shared within the form, including a statement about the voluntary nature of participation and the ability of the participant to withdraw at any time.

Data Collection Processes

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with the selected participants. The interviews were conducted via a video-based platform and were recorded to support the collection of data. Within the recruitment letter, prospective participants were given my contact information and instructions on scheduling a block of up to 60 minutes to conduct the interview.

The interview questions (Table 2) were field-tested with two school board members known to me. The field testing of questions allowed me to ensure that the questions were clear, valid, and reliable for data collection for the study. Additionally, field testing in this manner also allowed me to gain familiarity and comfort with the process of recording interviews, using the transcription features of the video-based platform, and assessing the length of time to schedule for the interviews.

Each interview began with a brief introduction statement, including a note of appreciation for participation, a statement of the purpose of the research, and a reminder of the voluntary nature of participation. A sample of the script of this was:

Thank you for agreeing to talk to me. I am interested in understanding the potentially evolving or changing role of the school board in public education here in Minnesota from school board members' perspectives, and I appreciate the time you're taking to talk to me today. Please note that your meeting with me will be completely confidential, as will your answers to these questions.

Participants all received a copy of the informed consent form (see Appendix 2), which was referenced and explained to them, including an emphasis on the voluntary nature of participation and the ability of the participant to withdraw at any time. The final step before moving into the research questions was to ask participants if they had any questions or concerns before commencing the interview.

Each interview asked the same interview questions, included with the corresponding research question in the table below (Table 2). I listened to responses and asked additional follow-up and probing questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012), including but not limited to those listed in Table 2.

Table 2

Interview Protocol

Research Questions	Interview Questions
RQ1. How do public school board members describe their initial	1. Why did you decide to run for the public school board?

<p>motivation to run for or seek an elected position on the public school board?</p>	<p>2. What do you hope to accomplish in your time on the school board?</p>
<p>RQ2. How do public school board members describe their roles and responsibilities in the public school system, and how do they come to understand their roles and responsibilities in the public school system?</p>	<p>3. How would you describe your roles and responsibilities as a member of the public school board?</p> <p>a. How did you come to understand your roles and responsibilities?</p> <p>4. How, if at all, has your understanding of your role changed since joining the school board?</p>
<p>RQ3. How do public school board members view their own effectiveness in performing their roles and responsibilities?</p>	<p>5. What does an effective school board member look like?</p> <p>a. How would you describe your effectiveness in performing your roles and responsibilities as a school board member?</p> <p>b. How do you know you are being effective?</p> <p>6. What advice would you give administrators seeking to have a productive working relationship with school board members?</p>
<p>RQ4. How do public school board members describe the future needs, trends, and purpose of their roles in public school board governance?</p>	<p>7. What trends or needs, if any, do you believe are impacting the public school board?</p> <p>a. In what ways are these trends impacting the public school board?</p> <p>8. How would you describe the impact, if any, these trends will have on the purpose for, or roles and responsibilities of, the public school board?</p>

Generic follow-up and probing questions:

1. Can you tell me more?
2. Can you give me a specific example?
3. What I heard is...
4. What was your role?
5. How so?

Interviews were conducted using a video-based platform and were recorded and stored in a secure folder only accessible to the researcher on a password-protected computer. Videos were saved utilizing a randomized number assigned to each. The actual identities of each participant were maintained in a location separate from the recorded files from each interview, on a password-protected computer, and in a file that required multi-factor identification. Further, once the data and themes were reported, generic participant identifiers were developed and utilized to protect the identity of the participants, school district, and community. The information from each session was transcribed as soon after the interview as was feasible. Once all interviews were transcribed, the data was coded and analyzed for themes and commonalities.

Part III: Data Analysis Steps

Data Analysis Processes and Procedures

One-to-one interviews up to 60 minutes long were conducted with 10 school board members from districts serving 4,000 to 11,000 students within the selected Minnesota Intermediate School District. Interviews were also recorded using a video-based platform. Once the interviews were completed, I created a transcription of each interview for the data analysis process. I then used the transcripts to engage in a process known as coding, which involved condensing data into themes or categories to discover patterns and themes within the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The coding process utilized a spreadsheet such that specific themes

were identified on one axis, with question responses from interviews on the other (Trixiemay Racer, 2017). I then noted the frequency of responses to themes to discover patterns and themes.

The actual identities of each participant were maintained in a location separate from the recorded files from each interview on a password-protected computer and in a file that required multi-factor identification. A numbering system was used within the spreadsheet to differentiate participant responses. Participants were then assigned generic letter identifications for the purpose of sharing perspectives and direct quotes when findings were reported.

Part IV: Quality Research Criteria

Evaluative Criteria

Steps were taken in this process to monitor and ensure the trustworthiness of the research design. As noted by Guba and Lincoln (1985), the worth of a research study depends on the research process' trustworthiness.

Member checking

The member-checking process was used to test the interpretations and conclusions of those from whom the data was collected (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, n.d.). Member checking took place during interviews by asking for confirmation or clarity of responses, working to ensure I waited to make assumptions, fill gaps, or draw conclusions on my own. Member checking was used after data was collected and as questions arose while reviewing data, including the coding process. While all candidates were offered the opportunity to review the transcripts, during the review of data and coding process, specific sections of transcript information were shared with four of the participants to confirm the accuracy of their opinions and perspectives.

Triangulation

This study involved interviews with 10 school board members currently serving in districts with a student enrollment between 4,000 and 11,000 students from the Southwest Twin Cities area in Minnesota. Participants for the study were selected from a metropolitan area intermediate district, which is composed of up to 17 different independent districts. Once interested candidates had been identified, representation from different districts for the study was confirmed to ensure multiple perspectives and backgrounds existed for the study including gender, district, and board member years of experience.

Expert Assistance

As the researcher, I utilized peers, including my University advisor, to debrief and support uncovering potential researcher biases and assumptions. Peers were also utilized to test and defend possible emerging themes and hypotheses (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

Transferability

I monitored and considered the transferability of what was learned as a part of this research. While the findings are specific to Southwest Twin Cities school districts with a population of 4,000 to 11,000 students, the findings are important for school boards throughout Minnesota and nationally. To support determinations related to transferability, I worked to capture sufficient detail that could be used to evaluate how conclusions could be transferred to other settings and situations (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Transferability was also a point of discussion through the oral exam process, which resulted in selecting a narrowed population of school districts for this study.

Limitations

As I am a public school district superintendent and have experience as a school administrator in multiple other positions and school districts, my professional history did create the potential to introduce bias during this process. This bias can include how the human experience is interpreted by the researcher as well as how I, as the researcher, monitored, recorded, and analyzed results in the context of how questions were posed or influenced. That said, given my experiences in many different types of districts and my sincere desire to learn from participants, I believe I was able to establish a rapport and relatability for the interviews.

Additionally, as the participants for the study were elected public officials, there was a concern about their willingness and ability, as political figures, to be open and honest about their true opinions and experiences. As a result, I worked to develop rapport with participants and also needed to offer clear and deliberate assurances as to the steps I would take to provide for their confidentiality.

This was a phenomenological study that resulted in the interview of 10 participants from the Southwest Twin Cities area school districts with between 4,000 and 11,000 students. The interviews were intended to be in-depth conversations to understand their experiences in context as part of their personal, human experience. However, this sample size was relatively small compared to the total population of all public school district board members, which therefore creates limits to the generalizability of results.

Part V: Research Dissemination and Conclusion

Participant Appreciation

Participants for the study were elected public school district board members who voluntarily chose to serve their community. Given this, the hope was that additional incentives

were not necessary to motivate participation but rather that each was willing to share their lived experiences as part of this learning process. Since the target was to have between 10 and 12 participants and that target was reached, it proved that additional incentives were not needed. Following the interviews, each participant received a note of appreciation for participating. Additionally, those interested were also informed they could receive results at the conclusion of the study.

Publishing

The path to completing this dissertation was intended to be the researcher's personal journey and accomplishment. Given this, the author intends to publish the completed dissertation as part of the Institutional Repository so it is searchable in the institution or through Google Scholar. At this time, there is no intention to publish via ProQuest, nor is there any intention to embargo the dissertation for any designated period of time.

Conclusion

Through this qualitative, phenomenological study, I hoped to learn more about the experiences of public school board members and to understand and describe effective governance and management relationships between public school board members and their respective superintendents. I hope that by understanding these dynamics, I can help explain how effective school board and superintendent relationships are formed to positively impact my future as a school superintendent and share these experiences with other superintendents and school boards.

Chapter Three provided an overview of the general design of the research and the methodology research overview, data collection, data analysis, and quality research criteria.

Chapter Four will begin the process of presenting and analyzing the data and detailing the findings of the study in relation to the research questions.

Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to add to the literature by better understanding the modern school board in context. The study further aimed to explore what motivates someone to run for the public school district board, how public school board members came to learn their specific roles and responsibilities, how public school board members view their effectiveness in performing their roles and responsibilities, and how public school district board members describe the future of public school governance. Data was collected by conducting semi-structured interviews with ten school board members currently serving in districts with a student enrollment between 4,000 and 11,000 students from the Southwest Twin Cities area.

In this chapter, I will present and interpret the significant emergent themes from the interviews. The most prominent emerging themes are discussed first and, therefore, not necessarily in the order questions were posed to participants. Each theme identified will also include relevant supporting evidence and analysis. The themes include the presence of politics and the current political environment; board members learn their roles and responsibilities from the Minnesota School Boards Association (MSBA) and from other board members; school board members are often motivated to run after being encouraged by others and a desire to make a positive impact; effective board members are prepared for meetings and keep student interests first, and board members measure their own effectiveness from the feedback of others; and productive working relationships with school board members are established through honesty, transparency, and trust.

Theme 1: The Presence of Politics and the Current Political Environment

This study found a clear and consistent theme from interviews with public school board members was the impact of politics and the political environment on the work of school board members. While references to politics appeared multiple times during various interviews, the theme was particularly notable through interview prompts associated with Research Question 4, which sought to understand how public school board members describe the future needs, trends, and purpose of their roles in public school board governance.

Data

As participants shared their first-hand experiences serving on the school board, responses included frequent references to politics and the political environment. Some participants described this both from their personal, first-hand experiences as school board members and also from what they observed in other districts. The political environment theme was particularly apparent when participants were asked, “What trends or needs, if any, do you believe are impacting the public school board?” As illustrated from the data in Table 3, nine of 10 participants explicitly identified politics and the political environment as a factor impacting the public school board. Further, of the nine who identified politics and the political environment as a factor, seven also referenced the impact of political special interest groups.

Table 3*Trends or Needs Impacting the Public School Board*

Code	Number of supporting participants
Politics	9
Political or special interest groups	7
School choice and public school enrollment decline	4
Getting and retaining quality school board candidates and members	3
Parent rights and involvement	2

Though the question participants were asked related to identifying trends was open-ended and could have been interpreted in multiple ways, it is notable that responses indicate that board members describe the impact of politics as negative. Participant C stated:

Clearly political divisiveness is a huge challenge. I do believe that there are concerted efforts to challenge the basic paradigm of public education in America. I will say we get lots of notes at the school board that are clearly kind of politically charged.

Participant E indicated they have experienced an increased presence of politics and political issues over the past five years. Participant E further offered the opinion that the political environment is harmful to public school students, having stated:

It seems like school boards are starting to become... nonpartisan boards to partisan boards. Politics, I have seen especially over the last 5 years has really come into our public schools. And you're seeing people from all sides, far extreme sides, left or right, that are running, and I question whether they're running for the right reasons. I feel even with some of the stuff that happened at the capital this past year. I always say that it's

unfortunate that we have the political divisiveness that we have on school boards because they're only hurting the kids. I mean, it's sad that our kids are put in the middle of the line of fire. And that's not what we're there for.

Participant I offered a perspective as a board member who has been monitoring public school board races in other districts. Participant I's comments offered some specific examples and an indication they would like to see it end, sharing:

I'm seeing it with my colleague, who's running for school board. Her opponent is backed by a very strong Trump-supporting, very right-wing family. Some agenda about making sure that critical race theory is not taught in the schools that they want to be able to approve curriculum, or what books get read, or what books are available. I mean, that's there. I'm hoping it will go away.

Like Participant I, Participant J offered insights about the politics on the school boards, but from a perspective of what they see in other school districts rather than their own. Participant J shared, "With the current political climate, it's putting incredible pressure on school boards. Not so much on ours yet, but that's probably coming."

Seven participant responses referenced political or special interest groups' impact on the school board. Without specifically qualifying the kind of impact it has on the school board, Participant A stated, "Politics for sure will affect school boards and whatever political interest groups happen to be, you know, paying attention to what's going on in your local community can impact the school board."

In a statement that drew a more direct connection between political or special interest groups and the impact on some of the functions of school districts, Participant D stated:

And then one last trend, of course, is what's going on, you know, about parental rights. I

mean Moms for Liberty are showing up. They're going to show up a whole lot more.

They're going to field more candidates and I think that we're going to get into more stuff about removing books, about changing the way history is taught. And we're only one election away from it being a whole different landscape here in Minnesota.

Participant C shared personal experiences with special interest groups offering endorsements during the school board elections, namely from the teachers' union. Participant C indicated satisfaction with not having been endorsed, suggesting it prevented them from having to feel like it created an expectation to vote in a particular way. Participant C stated:

And it'd be interesting to ask if any of my colleagues who were endorsed by the teachers' union, for example, to deal with... if, you know, they ever get that pressure? But I was not endorsed by the teachers' union, which I was heartbroken about at first because I'm way pro-teacher. But at the end of the day, because we live in a purple district, it probably worked out to my advantage interestingly enough. And of course I care about teachers, but I care about staff and I care about students. And I care about our community members, too. So you know that... the pressure hasn't been super intense there for me personally yet, but I didn't run my campaign based on, which I think some people have, whether they be beholden to a particular issue.

While the presence of politics and the political environment emerged as a clear theme in this study, there was not a consistent theme related to how board members described the impact it could have on the future of the public school board. To illustrate the wide range of perspectives, results outlined in Table 4 show that, while a few participants suggested it would have no notable impact, two other participants offered the perspective that public education will not exist in the current format in the future.

Table 4*The Impact of Trends on the Public School Board*

Code	Number of supporting participants
No noted impact	3
Strained relationships among board members	3
Board member desire for more authority	3
Getting and retaining quality school board candidates and members	3
Board members make decisions based on fear	2
Public schools will not exist in the future	2

In apparent concurrence with Participant C’s statement that there are “concerted efforts to challenge the basic paradigm of public education in America,” Participant B was openly critical of the current state of the public school board and public education, offering an opinion that public education would need thorough reform or it would potentially face extinction. Participant B stated, “Basically, I think education needs to reform and change” and further amplified their message that the current model of public school boards is ineffective, stating:

I think our local boards are unnecessary as we currently function. Whether or not that's actually true, every single thing we do is, we say this is the MSBA policy so we're going to accept it as is because they're smarter than us. This is how the Minnesota law was described to us by Minnesota Department of Education. It's happening in other states, and if school choice gets full where the dollar follows, I think it's two generations and public schools don't exist in any meaningful way.

While other participants' responses varied, some still defaulted to the assumption that the school board would have the same general purpose, roles, and responsibilities. For example, Participant G stated, "I think if you distill it down, there's pretty clear expectations of what being on a school board is and what it is not. I think MSBA does a really good job spelling that out." In discussing the impact politics and the political environment would have on the purpose for and roles and responsibilities of the public school board, Participant I did not deviate from their current understanding of school board functions, and referenced change in terms of policy changes. Participant I stated, "If they end up being the majority of the board, I would say that they could actually have some... quite a bit of impact based off of how they might redo policy."

Analysis

This study found a clear theme that public school board members describe the current state of politics and political environment as having a negative impact on the public school board. This finding is supported within the literature as authors and research scholars have found an increasingly negative impact from the influence of politics and special interests on public school boards (Dansberger, 1994; Grissom, 2010; Sawchuk, 2020; Weiler, 2015).

Participant C described experiences related to endorsements that some candidates received from the teachers' union and the potential pressures of being beholden to a particular group or issue. Similarly, Shockman (2022) described hotly contested school board elections where candidates were endorsed by opposing sources including teachers' unions, which Starr (2018) shared was negatively impacting the ability to manage the public school system effectively. Further, the literature supports the position that influential groups can have adverse effects on school boards when they advocate for self-interests or specific and narrow political positions (Grissom, 2010).

One of the more interesting findings from the study was the lack of consensus regarding how board members describe the impact it could have on the future of the public school board. Participant B's comments paralleled arguments from Kogan (2022) that the current public school board governance model is ineffective and needs reform. Also, a few candidates made statements indicating concerns about turnover in board members. Similarly, Pendharkar (2022) reported that two-thirds of incumbent board members did not seek new terms in the 2022 election cycle. That said, there was no clear consensus among participants related to the impact of politics and the political environment on the purpose for, or roles and responsibilities of, the public school board.

Conclusion

The first, and most prominent, theme from this study of the public school board is related to the impact of politics and the political environment on the school board. To varying degrees, participants referenced politics and the political environment in responses to multiple research questions. The next theme I will summarize involves how members learn their roles and responsibilities while serving on the public school board.

Theme 2: Board Members Learn Their Roles and Responsibilities from the Minnesota School Boards Association and from Other Board Members

The second theme explores responses to interview questions associated with Research Question 2, which sought to understand how public school board members describe their roles and responsibilities in the public school system, and how they came to understand these. This study found that the methods by which school board members come to understand their roles commonly include both formalized training as well as informal learning from other members of public school boards.

Data

The findings presented in Table 5 demonstrate that board members most commonly learn about their roles from the training and materials provided by the Minnesota School Boards Association (MSBA), followed by learning their roles from other school board members.

Table 5

How School Board Members Come to Know and Understand Their Roles and Responsibilities

Code	Number of supporting participants
MSBA training and materials	8
Other board members	6
Previous experiences on nonprofit boards	2
Noted a disconnect between what people think the role is and what it actually is	2

Participants A, E, and F all made comments that referenced how they had learned how to be a school board member from both the Minnesota School Board Association and other board members. Participant A stated that they met with school board members before and after running for the school board. When seeking to understand the role before running, Participant A stated they had “met with former board members... and I met with other elected officials to try to get the lay of the land for the community.” After being elected, Participant A stated they “met with the other fellow board members as well, did all of the onboarding with MSBA, asked a lot of questions, took a lot of copious notes.” Materials and training provided by the MSBA continued to be important to Participant A, who shared, “MSBA sends out the Daily News articles and I would read those and anything that came out from AMSD, anything that came out from MSBA. I read those and didn't skip anything, whatever was out there that was available.”

Participant E described a similar experience to that of Participant A relating to the impact of learning from other school board members and the impact of MSBA training. Participant E shared:

I met with a couple of board members when I was running initially to learn a little bit more about the role and responsibilities. So that helped me gain a little bit more perspective. Because I had watched previous board meetings and stuff like that, but really wasn't versed in what a board member really does. I really dove into being a board member and engaged and got involved and really tried to be a sponge and learn as much as I could through our own district, as well as through the School Board Association and attending all their education, opportunities, and things like that.

Participant F shared their experience of learning from the MSBA and learning from board members from other public school districts. Participant F stated:

One thing that has helped me is going to like the MSBA Annual Conferences in January, or participating in those in the calls that they do periodically, or participating in the MSBA delegate assembly in December, which I've done the last 2 or 3 years, and just having those opportunities to also learn from other people in other districts as well. Yes, the staff at MSBA is very knowledgeable and very experienced, but also getting those perspectives from other board members in other parts of the state and learning about some of their challenges and their experiences. I find that helpful and how I think about my role and what I can do differently.

Analysis

The literature reviewed for this dissertation demonstrated that when research scholars and education leaders described how school boards receive training and development, they included

opportunities provided by consulting firms or offered by professional organizations like the MSBA and Teamworks International. Participant responses made it clear that many board members are exposed to the numerous opportunities for training and development from the MSBA (n.d.b). The literature also describes the impact of school board mentorship programs. While participants did not necessarily name mentoring formally with a title, the descriptions of board members learning from other board members, even in a more informal way, are similar to the purpose for and scope of mentoring, including how mentoring can provide historical and institutional knowledge to new board members that are not typically a part of standard training and materials (Mitchell, 2020). The results of this study appear to demonstrate that board members acknowledge they learn about their roles and responsibilities from other members of the school board.

Conclusion

The second theme from this study demonstrates that public school board members come to understand their roles and responsibilities through the MSBA and other board members. While exploring this theme helped to know how board members learn to perform their roles, it does not address why board members choose to run for the school board in the first place. I will analyze the next theme and summarize how study participants described their motivation to run for the school board.

Theme 3: School Board Members are Often Motivated to Run After Being Encouraged by Others and a Desire to Make a Positive Impact

The next theme I will present emerged through discussion related to what motivated participants to run for school board. The most frequent response indicated that individuals ran for the public school board because they were encouraged to run by someone else. Further,

participants also shared a desire to have a positive impact on the school district and community. This theme represents the responses associated with Research Question 1, which explored how public school board members currently serving in districts with a student enrollment between 4,000 and 11,000 students from the Southwest Twin Cities area describe their initial motivation to run for or seek an elected position on the public school board.

Data

During the study, participants were specifically asked why they chose to run for the public school board and what they hoped to accomplish in their time on the board. As participants shared their personal stories and what motivated them to run for the school board, seven of 10 shared that a significant motivating factor was having been encouraged to run by someone else. This finding is outlined in Table 6, which also shows the second most popular response indicated that people were motivated to run by a desire to make a difference or positive change. As shown in Table 7, the desire to make a difference was the most common response when participants were asked to share what they hoped to accomplish on the school board. When combined, eight of 10 candidates made a statement regarding the desire to make a positive change or difference through their involvement in the school board.

Table 6

Motivating Factors Impacting the Decision to Run for Public School Board

Code	Number of supporting participants
Encouraged to run by someone in the community	7
Feel like I can make a difference	6
Specific Issue	5
Generally dissatisfied with the district, leadership	3

Table 7*What Public School Board Members Hope to Accomplish*

Code	Number of supporting participants
Make positive change	7
Improve trust and visibility in the community	5
Help the school board function properly	2

Participant E was one of the seven participants who reported that a motivating factor leading them to run for the public school board was being encouraged to run by someone else, and stated, “A couple of community members encouraged me to run. We had some pretty significant issues in our school district with a previous superintendent. And there was a lot of... the trust was gone.” The experience from Participant D also helped underscore the impact that having been encouraged to run for school board had on their decision-making. Participant D offered that they did not initially want to run for the school board, stating, “I was drafted to do this. This was not on my bucket list whatsoever. When I came in, I went into it very reluctantly.”

Participant A was encouraged by others to run for school board, but also indicated motivation based on concerns with their public school system and the desire to impact change. Participant A initially shared, “I could see the inequities across the district between the schools and I could see that there were haves and have-nots, and I wanted to be able to make a change.” Participant A also described an experience such that a committee of teachers, staff, and parents made recommendations on how district resources should be used, but the administration was not adhering to the recommendations. Though all of these experiences led to Participant A engaging with the school district administration and school board, ultimately it was their spouse pointing out an opening for the school board was coming up that initiated the curiosity about seeking

election. That spouse's prompting, combined with other recent frustrations, led a friend to encourage Participant A to run for the school board as well, which Participant A described by stating, "So my friend was like, well, you know now you need to run for school board."

Participant I experienced persistence in being encouraged to run, and described it sharing, "And he pressured me for about 6 years. Every time there was an election, he's like, why isn't your name on there? And I'm like, well, the timing is not right." Participant I later ran for school board after what they described as "half-heartedly" telling others about the persistent push to run and numerous responses of encouragement, which she described as, "and everybody's like you should (run for the board)."

When combining responses related to both the motivating factors impacting the decision to run for the public school board and what board members hope to accomplish, eight of 10 participants expressed their desire to use their skills and knowledge to have a positive impact. These appear in Table 6 and Table 7 and have been coded for factors of being motivated by the feeling of being able to make a difference and hoping to make a positive change while serving on the school board.

Participant D, who shared they had been encouraged by others to run for the school board, also acknowledged the desire to make a difference and advocate for others. Participant D stated, "I just felt that, you know, before I go from this earth I probably should try and do something that I advocate for others to do, and so that's why I did it." Similarly, Participant G shared, "Certainly at the end of the day, the outcome is to provide the best learning opportunity for students. So to the extent that I could contribute and help further, you know that outcome, great."

In addition to the factors above, half of those interviewed indicated that they also ran for

school board based on specific issues, as noted in Table 6. Participant A mentioned previously they were partly motivated by inequities, and stated, “Because I could see the inequities across the district between the schools and I could see that there were have and haves and have nots. And I wanted to be able to make a change.” For Participant B, the school curriculum motivated them to run multiple times after being unsuccessful in their prior attempts. Participant B shared:

So I started paying attention to schools just right before COVID. We had a little bit of a dust-up with LGBTQ curriculum in our preschool, plus some critical theory. So the school board parents group got going, and I have participated in that. And so that got me going and then I ran unsuccessfully... and then... and then I got on.

Participant H described initially having considered running for the school board after observing what they considered a systemic lack of accountability for school employees who were being protected by a union. That desire for more accountability resulted in conversations with others who encouraged Participant H to run for the school board, a decision later solidified during the COVID-19 pandemic. As Participant H described it:

Fast forward to the pandemic, and as a parent with 2 children really, really struggling through the pandemic, I mean really struggling. And I could share the instances, but I know that you're you...you've been through it, and you know all the different struggles. So it's not the kind of struggle, it was the lack of feeling heard at all by the district, and I was one of many parents that started attending school board meetings. I attended almost every single school board meeting up until I was elected. And then it was again the disconnect... the disconnect I felt as a parent pleading, pleading with the superintendent, pleading with the board, and pleading in a way like, hey, help me understand. Help me understand the decisions that you're making because not every school district is making

these decisions. So we can't just blame it like... and it was like blame. The union, blame this, blame that, but no accountability.

Accountability was also a specific issue for Participant J, who succinctly stated being motivated to run due to “a past superintendent was making bad decisions and there was no accountability.”

Analysis

Reviewing and understanding what motivates someone to run for the school board is important, as their motivations for serving in this role will impact how they utilize their authority (Mountford, 2004). Since decisions made by the public school board should be made in the interest of the betterment of the entire district and not the narrow views and perspectives of these political enclaves (Grissom, 2010; Sawchuk, 2020; Weiler, 2015), this emergent theme of a desire to have a positive impact is consistent with the literature.

That said, given the absence of the appearance in the literature reviewed, an unexpected theme was the number of participants who shared they ran based on the encouragement of others. This factor in running for the board was particularly notable from Participant D, who shared, “This was not on my bucket list whatsoever. When I came in, I went into it very reluctantly.” The significant impact that this encouragement appeared to have on the decision to run for school board appears to be missing from the literature, which instead referenced that motivating factors included the desire to serve or frustration about policies or decisions of the current board (Sawchuck, 2020).

Conclusion

The third major theme in this research reflected that the most prevalent reason school board members cited for running for the public school board was that they were encouraged to run by someone else. Participants also often shared their desire to make a positive impact while

serving on the public school board. With a better understanding of why board members choose to run, the next theme to be explored will involve how participants describe being effective members of the school board.

Theme 4: Effective Board Members are Prepared for Meetings and Keep Student Interests

First, Board Members Measure Their Own Effectiveness From the Feedback of Others

The next theme that emerged from interviews with members of the public school board relates to how participants describe the effectiveness of members of the board and how participants measure their own effectiveness. Most commonly, participants shared the view that effective board members come prepared for meetings by reading the board agenda and information packets before the meeting. Additionally, the most common way participants measure personal success is through feedback from others. This theme cluster describes responses to interview questions associated with Research Question 3, which explored how public school board members view their own effectiveness in performing their roles and responsibilities.

Data

During the study, participants were asked to describe what an effective school board member looks like. They were also asked how they describe their own effectiveness in performing their roles and responsibilities as a board member and how they know they are effective. As shown in Table 8, six of 10 participants shared that effective board members come to meetings prepared, including by having read all relevant materials on the agenda in advance. Additionally, five of 10 participants referenced that effective board members are student-focused and make decisions with the best interests of all students in mind.

Table 8

How School Board Members Describe Effective School Board Members

Code	Number of supporting participants
Come to meetings prepared	6
Student-focused and make decisions with all students in mind	5
Engage with the community, be visible	4
Stay out of the weeds (stay in governance, not management)	4
Listen to people	3
Be a cheerleader for the district	2

Participant C described an effective school board member by stating, “I think it's being prepared. It's reading the material. It's being curious and asking questions.” Similarly, Participant E described an effective public school board member by sharing, “Someone that is engaged. They're prepared when they come to meetings.”

Participant A covered the need to be prepared for meetings, and also offered perspectives related to the student-focused theme. Participant A stated:

An effective school board member starts by listening and taking notes, arriving prepared having done their homework. And they're engaged and asking questions pertinent to the subject matter of the meeting. They don't ask questions that have been covered by the materials, the meeting materials. They ask questions that go beyond whatever is in front of them that have to do with policy governance in terms of the work that we do. We always keep our students front and center. It's not about us. It's not about the leadership. It's not about staff, although, you know, we are responsible for the adults in the building,

too, you know. Ultimately, we're here to serve our students and all the decisions that we make need to be focused on them and their well-being.

In the coding of responses shown in Table 9, seven of 10 participants indicated that they measure their effectiveness as a school board member based on the feedback they hear from others, including verbal affirmation. Some participants also referenced measuring effectiveness based on the context of emails they receive, helping them to receive positive or negative feedback from others. The absence of emails was also interpreted by some as positive, as they suggested that when people are not communicating frustration it indicates they must be satisfied.

Table 9

How School Board Members Measure Their Own Effectiveness

Code	Number of supporting participants
Feedback from others	7
Being re-elected	3
Self-reflection	2

When describing how to measure their own effectiveness, Participant G referenced feedback from others, stating, “Literally feedback that I received this morning was hey, thanks for what you're doing. You know, to hear that from teachers, that's big.” Participant G also said:

So for me personally, just to be able to see that level of engagement and then receive that positive feedback tells you you're doing something right. And I want to use this other metric. It's almost like if the phone doesn't ring, if you're not getting that email, you might also be doing something right. If the bat phone isn't ringing, and there isn't the perception of some immediate need or perceived crisis, then you're probably... The community is happy with the outcome.

Participant C also noted verbal affirmations and gratitude from others as a sign of effectiveness. Further, Participant C stated that their success as a board member was evident based on “interactions with community members, right affirmations with community members that you know they feel good about the direction of the district, and that ends up being sort of an implicit endorsement.”

Analysis

Within this study, the theme of keeping the greater good at the forefront, including focusing on students' interests, was apparent. Likewise, this theme is supported by literature showing that an effective school board maintains a focus on making decisions in the interest of the greater benefit of the organization rather than a narrow scope of specific political issues or special interests (Grissom, 2010; Sawchuk, 2020; Weiler, 2015). Closely connected, Devarics and O'Brien (2019) found that school boards that focused on creating a vision based on student achievement were generally higher functioning than those that did not.

An interesting theme from this research is that participants reported being prepared for meetings as an important factor in evaluating the effectiveness of school board members. Board member preparation as a measure of effectiveness did not appear in the literature reviewed, and it is interesting that the basic premise of reading the materials in advance was identified as important to board members. Additionally, the literature reviewed in this study did not address the important role that community feedback played in board members' view of effectiveness. That said, one could perhaps consider it a connection between the impact of feedback received by board members and literature that covers board member turnover based on political pressure and division on school boards (Pendharkar, 2022; Shockman, 2022).

Conclusion

The fourth major theme that emerged in this research related to how school board members measure the effectiveness of school board members and themselves. Table 8 illustrates the common responses, including board members being prepared for meetings and keeping student interests at the forefront of decisions. Additionally, the findings in this section underscore the critical role that constituent feedback plays in helping a school board member evaluate their effectiveness. The next theme relates to participants' common advice for administrators on developing positive working relationships with the public school board.

Theme 5: Productive Working Relationships with School Board Members are Established Through Honesty, Transparency, and Trust

The final theme emerged from analyzing responses to interview questions associated with Research Question 3, which asked participants to share the advice they would give to administrators seeking to have a productive working relationship with school board members. The most common participant response was encouraging administrators, specifically superintendents, to establish positive working relationships through honesty, transparency, and trust. Further, the second most common response involved utilizing effective communication strategies.

Data

During the study, participants were asked to offer advice to administrators seeking to have a productive working relationship with school board members. As shown in Table 10, seven of 10 participants referenced the importance of honesty, transparency, and trust. Additionally, five of 10 specifically referenced the importance of effective communication.

Table 10*Productive Working Relationships Between Administration and School Board*

Code	Number of supporting participants
Honesty, transparency, trust	7
Effective communication	5
Help empower board members	4
Get to know on a personal level (not all business)	3

In offering advice to administrators, Participant B touched on honesty as a part of their response, having stated, “I think superintendents can have a huge impact if they're honest, practical, and realistic.” Participant I stated, “I think you know, transparency is the key on both sides. That's the biggest one is that transparency.” Later, Participant I went on further and shared the importance of building trust, but acknowledged the struggles of their current board in working through these matters, wondering aloud, “So how do you develop that kind of similar trust relationship between the superintendent and the board?”

Offering a perspective that included both the importance of trust and communication, Participant C stated, “Communication is super important.” A short time later, Participant C also shared:

What I'm about to say is that there is a fair amount of trust there. If trust isn't there, that's a different story. But assuming there's some trust there, and you feel reasonably good about the folks that you have around the table, I think superintendents understanding how those Board members can serve as really helpful, and ambassadors and strategic partners.

Participant E also referenced trust, transparency, and communication, stating:

But I would say as administration, having that open communication and dialogue with

board members is extremely important. And I know that superintendents typically only communicate with the Board chair, but I think just having that open door. Open communication with all board members is extremely important. Just to be transparent, establishing that trust. I think that's key.

Analysis

Though not intending to marginalize the importance of the data collected as it pertains to successful relationships between a superintendent and the public school board, this is perhaps among a handful of predictable responses. Lencioni (2012) discusses the importance of establishing trust within high-functioning teams to avoid destructive conflict within the group. The literature reviewed in this study provided a notable connection to the importance of avoiding conflict with the school board, citing consistently that an effective public school board develops a positive working relationship absent unproductive conflict (Ford & Ihrke, 2017a; Hess, 2002; Land, 2002; Weiler, 2015; Worner, 2010). Additionally, Bollman and Deal (2017) shared that improperly managed conflict can lead to destructive power struggles.

Outside the two more common responses shown in Table 10, there were two other less common but still notable outcomes. The first is the perspective of four of 10 participants who wanted the superintendent to help empower them as board members by allowing or encouraging them to utilize their specific skills or areas of expertise. Additionally, 3 participants shared a desire for the superintendent to get to know the board members on a more personal level to avoid making it an all-business type relationship.

Conclusion

This chapter summarized research collected through individual interviews with currently serving public school board members. These interviews provided insights into the perspectives

of school board members related to what motivates someone to run for a public school board, how public school board members come to learn their specific roles and responsibilities, how public school board members view their effectiveness in performing their roles and responsibilities, and how public school board members describe the future of public school governance. Additional information about the ten participants is outlined in Table 1, including gender and years of service. While efforts were made to monitor the impacts of these differences, no significant findings based on these categories emerged.

In the next chapter, I will provide implications and recommendations based on the results of this study and will also provide recommendations for future studies. Further, I will outline how these details will be shared with others with the hope of having a positive impact on the work of the public school board.

Chapter Five: Recommendations and Conclusion

Introduction

This dissertation explored how public school district boards govern a district with their respective superintendents, including if and how this may evolve. The ultimate purpose was to understand and offer strategies to enhance the effectiveness of public school governance. This study also intended to use the results to help superintendents, school board leaders, board members, and district administrators learn strategies that support school boards and superintendents to work together to maximize the system's effectiveness and achieve their ultimate goal of improving student achievement. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1. How do public school board members describe their initial motivation to run for or seek an elected position on the public school board?

RQ2. How do public school board members describe their roles and responsibilities in the public school system, and how do they come to understand their roles and responsibilities in the public school system?

RQ3. How do public school board members view their own effectiveness in performing their roles and responsibilities?

RQ4. How do public school board members describe the future needs, trends, and purpose of their roles in public school board governance?

A review of the available literature offered some insights related to the research questions, including the purpose and role of the school district board and superintendent. The literature also covered the emerging trends that may challenge the work of the school board and superintendent, how to measure the success of the school board, and the importance of school

board training and development as a way to understand and perform their roles. However, there were gaps in the literature. For instance, most of the studies reviewed were quantitative and outdated, with the need to be understood and explained in the context of more recent events. An updated review could help to understand the current state of the school board in a modern context, including how current challenges could impact the public school board.

The following sections will share the overall contributions of the study, implications and recommendations, and some conclusions. Further, this chapter will offer insights related to leadership practices, policies, and scholarship. Specifically, this chapter will provide six recommendations with three related to leadership practices and policies and three suggestions for future research.

Overall Contribution

Through this qualitative study, semi-structured interviews were conducted to better understand the modern school board in context. Participants included in the study were members of public school boards currently serving in districts with a student enrollment between 4,000 and 11,000 students from the Southwest Twin Cities area. The interviews were conducted and recorded using a video-based platform and were transcribed and used to code results.

The first clear and consistent theme emerging from interviews with public school board members was the perspective that politics and the political environment were having a negative impact on their work as school board members. This finding supports and expands on results from previous studies and summaries that have described the increasingly negative impact that the influence of politics and special interests have on public school boards (Dansberger, 1994; Grissom, 2010; Sawchuk, 2020; Weiler, 2015). That said, this study demonstrated a need for developing more consensus on how board members describe the impact that politics and the

political environment could have on the future purpose for, or roles and responsibilities of, the public school board.

The second theme presented in this study is that public school board members most commonly learn about their roles from the training and materials provided by the Minnesota School Boards Association (MSBA) and from other school board members. This theme supports and expands on findings from previous literature which found a similar manner in which boards learned how to perform their roles from the MSBA and professional organizations. Previous findings also describe the impact of board members mentoring other board members as a means to learn their roles and responsibilities.

The next theme that emerged from this study was that the most prevalent reason school board members cited why they ran for the public school board was that someone else had encouraged them to run. Further, as a reason to run, and an indication of what they hoped to accomplish on the school board, participants shared their desire to make a positive impact on the school district and community. This theme supports and expands on previous findings that included references to candidates who run to make a difference or have a positive impact (Sawchuck, 2020). That said, previous literature reviewed did not cite themes related to public school board members running for election based on the encouragement of others.

The fourth theme that emerged in this study was based on how participants described the effectiveness of school board members, specifically the view that effective board members come prepared for meetings by reading the board agenda and information packets before the meeting. Additionally, participants offered that the most common way that school board members measure personal success is through feedback they receive from others. Feedback as a prominent source for board members in evaluating their own effectiveness expands on previous findings

that did not include this as a factor in how school board members viewed their or others' effectiveness as board members.

The final theme that emerged from analysis in this study is that board member advice to administrators seeking to establish positive working relationships with board members is to focus on honesty, transparency, and trust, with a secondary theme of utilizing effective communication strategies. This finding supports and expands on previous studies that shared that an effective public school board develops a positive working relationship between its members and its superintendent, absent unproductive conflict (Ford & Ihrke, 2017a; Hess, 2002; Land, 2002; Weiler, 2015; Worner, 2010).

In the next sections, I will offer implications and recommendations for superintendents, school board leaders, board members, and district administrators as to leadership practices, policies, and scholarship that support school boards and superintendents in working together to maximize the effectiveness of the system to achieve their ultimate goal of improving student achievement.

Implications and Recommendations for Leadership Practice and Policy

In this section, I will offer recommendations for practice and policy for superintendents, school board leaders, board members, and district administrators to support school boards and superintendents in working together to fulfill the mission of the public school district. These recommendations are based on the findings of this dissertation and also come from my ideas generated upon reflection of these findings.

School Boards Should Train on How to Work in Politically Charged Environments

Public school boards, like many organizations, are inherently political given they are composed of individuals with different experiences, interests, and values charged with deciding

how best to use finite resources to achieve the school district's mission (Bolman & Deal, 2017). That said, politics and even some levels of conflict are not inherently wrong, as was an apparent theme from participants in this study. Instead, Bolman and Deal (2017) shared that creativity and innovation can result from a healthy level of conflict, and Lencioni (2012) shared that healthy conflict can essentially be a positive way to exchange the best ideas.

Independent of the perception of the political environment as positive or negative, it appears that the modern politically charged environment is a regular part of school board election cycles and is unlikely to change anytime soon (Pendharkar, 2022; Mahoney et al., 2022; Shockman, 2022). As a result, public school boards should engage in professional development to build skills for dealing with politics, political issues, and politically charged environments. This training should be designed to prepare school board members to work through political matters constructively and avoid unproductive conflict that decreases the effectiveness of the school board (Ford & Ihrke, 2017a; Weiler, 2015). Training should also be designed to help board members understand the interplay of conflict and power for making decisions about using finite resources to achieve their mission (Bolman & Deal, 2017).

Since the themes in this study make it clear that public school board members acknowledge they learn about their roles from the MSBA, the MSBA needs to lead in designing and providing professional development to school board members for dealing with politics and politically divisive times and issues. The training should avoid implying a correct or incorrect political ideology, but instead support best practices in navigating differing ideas and perspectives on the board and with the community.

School Board Members Should Review Methods for Measuring Effectiveness

Data from this study indicated that members of the public school board judge their

effectiveness based on the feedback of others. With such a high value placed on feedback as a means to evaluate effectiveness, public school boards should find ways to be deliberate about gathering feedback. Rather than relying on anecdotal comments from individual conversations or judging effectiveness based on a pattern of positive or negative emails that hot-button issues could drive, school boards should purposefully gather feedback.

First, school board members should consider developing a list of key individuals in the community that are used to support gathering feedback and ideas deliberately. Those key contacts should include prominent and influential voices in the community who can offer feedback on the board members' and the superintendent's ideas and decisions. The key individuals selected should come from a broad range of perspectives represented in the community and could include, among others, district staff, business leaders, parents, retirees, and elected officials. Because boards often are not elected in a way that represents the school district (Kogan, 2022), feedback should be sought to ensure perspectives are balanced related to the socioeconomics, race, gender, age, or faith-based backgrounds of the community. Gathering perspectives from a wide demographic can offer a sustainable, balanced approach to ensure feedback to a board member is not only from like-minded individuals or a small but vocal special interest.

As another option, school boards should consider exploring other means to evaluate effectiveness, such as the self-evaluation tool available from the MSBA (n.d.b). A school board could also create a measuring instrument that includes factors important to board members. For example, in the findings of this study, a board measuring instrument could include whether board members are prepared by reading board materials before the meeting. Additionally, as many public school board members report a desire to use their time on the school board to make a

positive change and to keep students' interests first, an instrument for evaluation could also include these factors as measurements.

School Boards and Superintendents Should Work Deliberately Together to Develop Trust

The findings of this study demonstrate that board members believe that productive working relationships between school boards and administration come through honesty, transparency, and trust. With a focus on trust as a foundation for high-functioning teams, Lencioni (2012) shares the importance of members needing to be vulnerable and set aside egos for the team's sake. Interestingly, Participant D somewhat inspired the specifics of this recommendation when offering a perspective on productive working relationships, having stated, "Having a damn sense of humor really makes a difference. Sharing some things about you that makes you human, that gives you some vulnerability."

In this regard, school boards should engage in regular discussion through retreat settings that emphasize building trusting relationships and collective vulnerability. Retreat topics can include helping people get to know each other through sharing about their families, personal journeys in life, values and beliefs, motivating factors for being on the board, or similar topics to help board members understand one another at a human level. For example, if one board member shares that their decisions in life are primarily driven by their faith, others can better understand their perspectives when brought to school board discussions. Board members can also learn about each other using more technical methods, such as personality indicators that facilitate understanding each other's personality traits or strengths. The general purpose is for board members to understand one another better and combat assumptions that could lead to unproductive conflict (Lencioni, 2012).

I believe it is critically important for a third party to facilitate these retreats. Having a

neutral person or group facilitate the conversation, places everyone on an equal level, and allows each person to participate similarly. If the retreat is driven by the superintendent or board chair, those individuals have less ability to focus as participants. For the entire team to develop a trusting relationship, all need to be able to focus on the experience with the group. These retreats should also be ongoing and not just one-time events. Developing and solidifying trust should be a lasting investment, and it is also essential to acknowledge that school boards can change with each new election cycle. When new members are introduced to the board, trust and vulnerable relationships must also be built with new members.

Implications and Recommendations for Future Research

This study aimed to understand how public school district boards govern a district with their respective superintendents, and what if any evolution of this model may be occurring. Additionally, the purpose was to understand and offer strategies to enhance the effectiveness of public school governance. This section offers future research recommendations that could support additional understanding.

General Study Recommendations

First, this study would benefit from increasing the sample size of participants. Interviewing ten public school board members took significant time and logistical planning, and the results were informative. That said, a larger population could also increase the validity of the data.

It would also be beneficial to broaden the representation of school districts. For this study, school districts selected ranged from 4,000 to 11,000 students from the Southwest Twin Cities. Future studies should seek to involve school districts of different sizes and also from multiple geographic locations. It would be helpful to understand if the opinions of school board

members differed when considering the district's size. Additionally, it would be good to test and understand how these dynamics compare and contrast for rural, suburban, and urban settings.

Future research should consider including potential focus groups as well. Particularly in the context of understanding how modern challenges are impacting the school board, as well as learning more about the impact the trends are having on the school board's future, focus groups could provide a rich opportunity for board members to form ideas from the experiences of one another.

Study the Impact of Politics and the Political Environment

Data from this study demonstrate that politics and the political environment are on the minds of public school board members. While public education is an inherently political system (Bolman & Deal, 2017), recent issues ranging from COVID-19 responses or conversations surrounding issues including race, gender identity and expression, and equity in school settings have created additional attention related to politics and the impact on public schools (Mahoney et al., 2022). There is more room to study this issue in detail.

First, an additional study of the impact of endorsements in public school elections is needed. Research should include reviewing currently serving school board members endorsed by others, including special interest groups, political groups, labor unions, or community members. Such a study should seek to better understand if such an endorsement impacted board members' decisions or their understanding of how one defines the success of school board members. With endorsements in public school board races becoming more common and political action committees spending large amounts of money on school board races (Campuzano, 2023), it would be important to better understand what specific impact this has on the public school board.

Second, participants in the study frequently described the current political environment

negatively, or as something they hoped to avoid. Through a holistic review of the modern political climate, what should also be investigated is if the impact of politics is actually negative as described or if there are actual benefits. During the study, one participant specifically talked about wanting to be a voice for a minority population in the community that felt they were being ignored. Future studies should seek to understand if the current political environment provides new avenues for exchanging ideas in a community that otherwise were missing. Future such studies should also ensure there is a focus on the impact on the dynamics of power and conflict.

Study the Future of the Model for Public School Board

For this study, participants were asked to describe the trends or needs the school board faces and how they believe these trends or needs are impacting the school board. The findings of this study demonstrated a need for more consensus regarding how board members describe the impact modern challenges facing them could have on the future of the public school board. Studying this specific aspect in a more informed way would be advantageous. Since board members were not given a working definition or examples of other options, perhaps the lack of consensus exists because many participants could not conceptualize models other than those in their current setting.

As an example of furthering this study, participants could first read an article from Kogan (2022), who argued that the current model for governing school districts was not designed for student achievement, is ineffective, and needs reform. Upon reading the article and getting an example of an argument related to reform, participants could then be asked to react to the article from their perspectives and respond to similar questions in this study.

A second avenue for additional research about the future model for public school boards would be to compare the public school board and other nonprofit boards. During this study, two

participants described their experiences serving on the boards of nonprofit organizations. Both shared an indication that the experiences were different. That is, they had been invited to serve on the nonprofit board because of specific perspectives or expertise they possessed and they were asked to utilize that expertise. When compared to the public school board, both described that their expertise did not feel utilized or valued. Future research could inform participants how other boards operate in contrast to public school boards, and then seek insights from them related to their perspectives having learned about another model. Such an exploration could also provide informed perspectives on how public school boards could evolve or operate.

Regardless of how to study the evolving nature of the public school board from the perspective of school board members, this area should receive additional study. Modern challenges, including local and global issues, are present in school districts at an incredibly rapid pace. Constant access to information and communication about these events exists through multiple channels, including social media. Such access to information can create an expanding gray area between governance and management tasks, and who is responsible for what within the context of school district governance and management is not as clean. I believe a potential lack of clarity will further amplify the need for strong communication and trust among the school board and superintendent.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand how Minnesota Southwest Twin Cities public school district boards govern a district with their respective superintendents, including if and how this may be evolving. The ultimate purpose was to understand and offer strategies to enhance the effectiveness of public school governance. I intend to use what I learned to help superintendents, school board leaders, school board members, and district administrators learn

strategies that support school boards and superintendents in working together to maximize the system's effectiveness to achieve their ultimate goal of improving student achievement.

More specifically, I plan to summarize and share my results and recommendations with leadership from the Minnesota School Boards Association. Additionally, I intend to share a summary with some in my superintendent colleague network to initiate ongoing dialogue about our future. After taking some time to consider that with my peers, I also plan to write an article for the Minnesota Association of School Administrators. I will also consider giving a presentation at a future professional conference.

After the first 20 years of my career as an educator and public school leader, I took a break and left the profession for a position in business. After a year away from serving in public education, I returned to education leadership with a renewed sense of purpose and commitment and an incredible drive to perform my role as a leader at the highest possible level. That renewed motivation sparked my doctoral journey. While conducting this dissertation, I learned a great deal about public education and myself as it relates to both leadership and scholarship.

As a result of this dissertation study, and reflecting on the possibilities in front of me, I am inspired to consider how school boards could create and model best practices to manage political discussion, including healthy conflict and exchange of ideas. If, through our collective training and commitments, people can come together around the idea that we are all here in the best interest of our students, we can hopefully accept differences of ideas and perspectives and make decisions in the best interest of our students. In doing so, school boards can represent the ideas of the entire community, ensuring that all voices are heard and represented. Further, this collective commitment can perhaps help public school district board members, in partnership with their superintendent, successfully achieve the mission of the school district.

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Appendix 1: Recruitment Email

Dear School Board Member,

I hope this finds you doing well.

My name is Brian Gersich, and I am a Minnesota school district superintendent and a doctoral candidate at Concordia University, Saint Paul, conducting my dissertation by studying the public school board. With many of the modern challenges communities are facing, I would like to understand the potentially evolving or changing roles of school boards in Minnesota. I am reaching out to you because I hope you will be willing to talk with me.

I understand your time is valuable. Yet because I think the perspectives of school board members are essential, I hope that you will nevertheless be willing to speak with me about your experiences on the school board. I anticipate that participation in this interview will provide you with a meaningful opportunity to share your stories and process your experience in running for and serving on the public school board. I hope that your insights can help inform future practice, policy, and scholarship.

If you are interested in participating in this study with a short interview (45-60 minutes) over Zoom, please send an email to me at [REDACTED]. Within the email, please include general days of the week and times of day that work best for you to participate in the interview. I will then provide you with scheduling options, and you will also be provided additional information about the study and an opportunity to ask any questions you have. I want to emphasize that I will keep your participation completely confidential and that your decision to participate will have no impact on your relationship with your school, your superintendent, your district, or my university.

I hope you consider sharing your experiences and insights with me, and I look forward to hearing from you!

Thanks so much,

Brian Gersich

Appendix 2: Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study entitled Strategies to Enhance Effectiveness of School Boards in Governance. The study is being done by Brian Gersich, a doctoral candidate at Concordia University, Saint Paul. Below you will find answers to the most commonly asked questions about participating in this study. Please read this document and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to participate in this study.

Why is the researcher doing this study?

The model for how public school districts are governed by a community-elected board of directors has been around for more than 200 years. With many of the modern challenges communities face, there is an increased desire to understand the changing roles of school boards and educational leaders in Minnesota. The researcher hopes this study will highlight the increasingly demanding and complex roles that school boards and education leaders play in their communities.

Why have I been asked to be in this study?

The participants selected for this study are school board members within the state of Minnesota. The inclusion criteria for this study requires that participants serve or work in Minnesota public school districts as school board members.

If I decide to participate, what will I be asked to do?

If you meet the criteria and agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

- Participate in a single semi-structured interview over the next month. Each interview will last between 45 and 60 minutes, will be conducted via Zoom, and video recorded.

What if I decide I don't want to be in this study?

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you decide you do not want to participate in this study, please feel free to say so. If you decide to participate in this study, but later change your mind and want to withdraw, simply notify me and you will be removed immediately. You may withdraw from this study at any point, however once data is aggregated into larger themes, withdrawal of your interview data will no longer be possible as it will have informed the analysis. Your decision of whether or not to participate will have no negative or positive impact on your relationship with Concordia University, St. Paul, or with me as the researcher.

What are the risks (dangers or harms) to me if I am in this study?

The risks associated with participation in this study are minimal.

What are the benefits that may happen if I am in this study?

This study offers no direct benefits to study participants. Indirect benefits include increasing the understanding of how school board members are leading in challenging times.

What will you do with the information you get from me and how will you protect my privacy?

I will make every effort to de-identify all data. When I write up the study, I will only use pseudonyms for participants, their schools, districts, and communities. Furthermore, I will not specify the city in which the research took place. I will only use pseudonyms in interview transcriptions and memos I write. I will delete audio or video recordings once the interviews are transcribed and will keep all digital data in password-protected folders on password-protected computers.

Could my information be used for future research?

No, your data will not be used or distributed for future research purposes, even if de-identified, without gaining further consent from you.

Are there possible changes to the study once it gets started?

If, during the course of this research study, the researcher learns about new findings that might influence your willingness to continue participating in the study, they will inform you of these findings.

How can I get more information?

If you have any questions, you are welcome to ask them before you sign this form. Please feel free to contact me at [REDACTED]. If you have other questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are welcome to contact the Concordia University Institutional Review Board at irb@csp.edu.

Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I consent to participate in the study and agree to be audiotaped or video-recorded.

My spoken consent affirms I have read this information, my questions have been answered, I am at least 18 years of age, and I agree to participate in this study.

Printed Name of Participant: _____

Date of Consent: _____

Participant's Signature

Researcher's Signature

Appendix 3: Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to talk to me. I am interested in understanding the potentially evolving or changing role of the school board in public education here in Minnesota from school board members' perspectives, and I appreciate the time you're taking to talk to me today. Please note that your meeting with me will be completely confidential, as will your answers to these questions. (Share consent form. Discuss. Ask if participants have any questions or concerns.)

Research Questions	Interview Questions
RQ1. How do public school board members describe their initial motivation to run for or seek an elected position on the public school board?	1. Why did you decide to run for the public school board? 2. What do you hope to accomplish in your time on the school board?
RQ2. How do public school board members describe their roles and responsibilities in the public school system, and how do they come to understand their roles and responsibilities in the public school system?	3. How would you describe your roles and responsibilities as a member of the public school board? a. How did you come to understand your roles and responsibilities? 4. How, if at all, has your understanding of your role changed since joining the school board?
RQ3. How do public school board members view their own effectiveness in performing their roles and responsibilities?	5. What does an effective school board member look like? a. How would you describe your effectiveness in performing your roles and responsibilities as a school board member? b. How do you know you are being effective? 6. What advice would you give administrators seeking to have a productive working relationship with school board members?

<p>RQ4. How do public school board members describe the future needs, trends, and purpose of their roles in public school board governance?</p>	<p>7. What trends or needs, if any, do you believe are impacting the public school board?</p> <p>a. In what ways are these trends impacting the public school board?</p> <p>8. How would you describe the impact, if any, these trends will have on the purpose for, or roles and responsibilities of, the public school board?</p>
<p>Generic follow-up and probing questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Can you tell me more?2. Can you give me a specific example?3. What I heard is...4. What was your role?5. How so?	