

Keeping the Main Thing the Main Thing

Reflections From the Field

The California Collaborative on District Reform is a learning community of school district leaders, advocates, policy makers, funders, and researchers dedicated to dialogue, problem solving, and collective action in service of all California K–12 students, especially those who have been traditionally underserved. One fundamental principle on which the group operates is that bringing together diverse perspectives to unpack educational challenges will help generate both the intellectual and social capital needed to solve significant problems of practice in education. Consistent with this point of view, we recognize that research benefits from the insights of other leaders whose expertise and practical experience can help to interpret findings, situate them in the context of a research base and on-the-ground practice, and contribute additional perspectives that advance our thinking and contribute to the knowledge base about district improvement.

In that spirit, this collection of reflections serves as a companion to the California Collaborative’s report, *Keeping the Main Thing the Main Thing: Lessons About Effective School Board Governance From Napa Valley and San José Unified School Districts*. The report describes the experiences, practices, and learnings from two school boards in California that strive for best-in-class approaches to governance. The four perspectives shared here from California Collaborative members can help deepen our understanding of the work underway in the San José and Napa Valley Unified School Districts and consider how to apply their story in a broader context.

Mike Kirst, professor emeritus at Stanford University and former president of the California State Board of Education, begins by framing the work of school boards with the historical roots of an expansive role that can overwhelm and distract from improvement efforts. Gabriela Mafi adds her perspectives from more than a decade as the superintendent of Garden Grove Unified School District and discusses the critical importance of relationship development and courageous leadership. Rick Miller chimes in next with insights born of a career working with superintendents across California as executive director of the CORE Districts and his own experiences as a trustee in Rocklin Unified School District; he offers a reality check about the priorities for and practical limits of effective governance practices. Finally, Mauro Sifuentes introduces the lens of an advocate, lending his experience as co-executive director of Californians for Justice to explore ways in which student voice intersects with the selection and ongoing work of school boards.





Mike Kirst

Professor Emeritus, Stanford University
Former President, California State Board
of Education

Despite the pivotal role that school boards play in shaping K–12 education at a local level, the research base on governance is surprisingly thin. Part of this challenge emanates from sheer scale. With more than 13,000 school boards and 80,000 board members across the United States, the methodological barriers to examining their work in any representative way are substantial. Case studies that unpack the details of how effective boards operate can help to illuminate a poorly understood feature of the public education landscape. To this end, *Keeping the Main Thing the Main Thing: Lessons About Effective School Board Governance From Napa Valley and San José Unified School Districts* makes an important contribution to the field.

The report begins by summarizing some of the pressures facing school boards. Some historical perspective helps to explain how this expansive role came to be. The American school board has its roots in rural communities of a largely agrarian society. The last substantive change to its design took place in the early 20th century, when reformers sought to insulate boards from political parties and general government by instituting at-large elections and charging them with all areas of local school operation. Historically, the role encompasses the legislative, executive, and judicial functions of school governance, which created an incentive for this kind of extensive involvement. The same fundamental structure survives today.

Designers of the system did not create a governance model to manage the complexities of today's school systems. Within the board's purview, aligning instructional materials, assessment practices, staff development, and resource allocation around curriculum and instruction poses considerable challenges for a collection of part-time laypeople. Requests and requirements from inside and outside the system push board members to respond to ensure legal compliance or avoid electoral defeat, even if doing so pulls attention away from a district's core priorities. Meanwhile, the decision a century ago to sever connections with city and county governments now compounds the task of providing much-needed integrated services for children and families. As has been true for many years, the result is that boards often try to do everything without doing anything in much depth.

The increased number of districts that select board members by district rather than through at-large elections, as is the case in San José Unified and Napa Valley Unified, can further complicate matters. Born from the civil rights movement, the transition to district elections sought to address historical patterns of underrepresentation. An unintended consequence of this development may be that board members view their responsibilities through the lens of specific constituent demands rather than see the district as a unitary entity. The report describes two districts whose trustees have admirably

prioritized students with the greatest need as part of a commitment to the entire district community. We might reasonably question whether their example is the exception rather than the rule.

This broader context helps illuminate why the circumstances surrounding school boards often divert them into minutiae and distract from the core work of teaching and learning. Napa Valley Unified and San José Unified offer useful

examples of how effective governance teams can articulate and maintain focus on their main mission. We should also acknowledge that while these districts are strong cases from which other school boards can learn, they may be atypical. If the goal is to foster effective governance on a broad scale, rethinking the goals and structures for local K–12 governance merits ongoing attention.



Gabriela Mafi

Superintendent,
Garden Grove Unified School District

As school board members individually and collectively contribute to the effectiveness of a district in achieving its overall goals, it's no surprise that the relationship between the superintendent and school board members can greatly impact the success of a district. Now in my 11th year as superintendent of a large urban district serving more than 38,000 students (79% free and reduced-price lunch status/94.5% students of color), I am beyond proud of the effectiveness of the Garden Grove Unified School District (GGUSD) Board of Education, who, while possessing varied personal and political perspectives, work together in unison to put students first and engage in cohesive decision making that moves our district forward. During my tenure, we have

successfully transitioned to trustee-by-area elections, and while board members frequently meet with the specific communities and schools they represent, they remain united in advancing the success of all 67 schools. The effectiveness and cohesion of the GGUSD Board reflects many of the strategies shared in the report *Lessons About Effective School Board Governance From Napa Valley and San José*.

As recommended in the report, it's critically necessary to strategically onboard school board members and keep them connected to the district's vision and mission. In GGUSD, that onboarding occurs through regular, frequent meetings with school board members (both one-on-one in individual meetings and as a

group during study sessions and closed sessions) to ensure they are consistently well informed about the district's challenges and successes. We have also been pleased to partner with CSBA for a board governance workshop held twice each year which addresses the board member self-evaluation process as well as creates ongoing revisions to our board governance handbook, which is inclusive of individual and collective school board norms.

When and if divisive issues may arise that cause board members to make choices that violate shared board norms or put the district at risk, it is critical that superintendents have established a pattern of providing individual feedback to each board member to help support their individual and collective success. These conversations can be challenging but are necessary; the superintendent must find the courage and confidence to let board members know how their actions are viewed by other board members and by the community as a whole. Before these critical conversations can happen, the superintendent must have established personal and professional relationships with each board member so that the feedback is viewed as coming from a critical friend and not a foe. The board member must feel confident that the superintendent is watching out for his or her best interests and helping each member to be viewed positively by the district and community.

Political agendas and internal controversies will surely continue to create challenges for school boards, including hostile school board meetings. It's critical that each school board develop proactive response plans to implement when meetings go awry. In GGUSD, since the pandemic, we have had to shut down three meetings due to disruption, but we proactively had a plan in place to ensure a safe environment and a contingency evacuation plan.

Finally, the superintendent's ability to support the board is in great part facilitated by his or her tenure in the chair. When I retire after 15 years as superintendent, I will be the district's fourth superintendent in 54 years, giving me the credibility to deliver more challenging messages that a new superintendent would not possess. In the superintendent selection process, it is important that the outgoing superintendent ensures that the incoming candidates are not beholden to any one or two board members, as that can make navigating board work very challenging and deter from progress. Having a 5-0 board does not mean that board members share the same political beliefs, it means that they share a commitment to do what's best for the communities they serve and work with a superintendent and staff that support them in ensuring that students come first always.





Rick Miller

Executive Director, CORE Districts
Former Trustee, Rocklin Unified School
District Board of Education

Reading through *Keeping the Main Thing the Main Thing*, I definitely nodded in agreement at several points. The idea that a governance team should include the superintendent particularly resonated with me as someone who works closely with superintendents and as a former board member. I truly believe it's all about relationships, and superintendents need to get trustees connected, which is tricky but doable given the Brown Act. But I've seen some great use of out-of-town trips (CSBA) or those board workshops where hardly anyone shows up. They can be perfect opportunities to emphasize relationships and build all-important connections.

And when the report talks about superintendents being unfamiliar with governance? That hit home on an issue I've observed throughout my career working with districts. Too often, superintendents viewed their job as keeping the board's drama away from the cabinet. But this can backfire when cabinet members step up to superintendency themselves, finding they're underprepared for the political and relational responsibilities necessary for quality leadership.

The onboarding section was also a breath of fresh air—practical, useful stuff there. Building and maintaining relationships with the board takes time, and this part of the report offers a solid roadmap.

But here's where my experience veers off a bit from the report. It's not always just about teaching

board members their official roles. From what I've observed, some trustees know the rules; they just choose to ignore them. After all, the board is a political position and some run with clear agendas on social or other issues. Once elected, they understandably believe their job is to push their agenda, and a CSBA training about the role of the board in governance won't change that. And here's the kicker—they often get political kudos and wins for ignoring governance and the law. This is where the report feels a bit too theoretical for me. What about the real-life struggles of being an elected politician in charge of a governance system? Those political pressures are no joke, and learning to handle them—especially early on—is a whole different ball game. Superintendents can be lifesavers here, offering not just empathy but also savvy political guidance on how to balance political needs with a focus on student learning.

The report lays out the ideal—the board's role in governance and all that. But let's be real. The most effective superintendents I've seen play it more like a team sport. Sometimes they let board members step out of their lanes, so to speak, to get a win. Sometimes they run tight ships. It's about knowing your individual board members and tweaking your approach all the time, often with a major rewrite after each election reshuffles the deck.

It's also about team. I've always loved Michael Fullan's advice: "Use the group to change the

group.” I’ve been super impressed by the superintendents I’ve seen who effectively encourage seasoned board members to step up, fostering a culture that values doing the right thing for governance, even if it’s not the popular choice politically.

To wrap it up, while the report gives some really good insights into school governance, and

I’ve seen first-hand the amazing leadership in San José and Napa. Too often, districts are a lot messier and more complex. For superintendents and board members, it’s a dance between sticking to the theory and adapting to the ever-changing political landscape, all while keeping their eyes on the prize.



Mauro Sifuentes

Co-Executive Director,
Californians for Justice

As an advocate for youth voice and racial justice in public education, I am so pleased with the way this paper spells out the institutional best practices of school boards that can contribute to true democratic and learning-centered outcomes. Knudson and Castro provide readers with a powerful educational tool for deeper understanding of public school boards, and how important local governance is in our community life.

Nestled between valuable insights from superintendents and school board members themselves, this research duo introduces important questions and context that hum just beneath the surface with regard to our present political and cultural moment: How

to educate the public (and new school board members) about the most responsive and responsible role school boards can take? How to navigate the hyper-politicization of school boards in our present moment? How to safeguard public education from bad-faith actors, both within and outside of school boards? We would all do well to read between their lines and introduce these questions into every space where questions of school board governance emerge. I am grateful this report exists and will share it with colleagues who operate in the organizing and advocacy spaces. The nuance and clarity of the roles and responsibilities of boards often get buried underneath flashy headlines and hot-topic debates.

The important role school boards play, as a collection of elected public servants, is not lost on me. As a representative of a youth leadership and organizing institution focused on youth voice and racial justice in California schools, it is my role and responsibility to raise the question of student agency. Across California, we are seeing movements to grant students who are 16 and 17 years old the right to vote in their local school board elections. From reading this paper and the incredible perspectives contained within them, it's clear that the time has come to give students a voice in who their school board members are.

As public education becomes the existential battleground for democracy, we have to address democratic praxis at the school board level by including the voices and votes of those most impacted by their leadership: students

themselves. In my experience, it is far more likely that students will be highly discerning of school board member credentials, and will focus on relevant experience because school board decisions shape the day-to-day lived realities and future possibilities for students. I have seen student intelligence and curiosity take shape through school board candidate forums, and we all stand to benefit from expanded voting access. Public schools are one of our last remaining public social safety nets, and this is particularly true for Black, Brown, Indigenous, low-income, immigrant, and LGBTQ+ youth in our communities. Their voices have powerful roles to play as we choose the composition and competencies to be present on school boards, today and for generations to come.



California Collaborative Members

The California Collaborative on District Reform joins researchers, practitioners, policymakers, support providers, advocates, and funders in ongoing, evidence-based dialogue to improve instruction and student learning for all students in California's urban school systems. Fundamental to the group's design is a belief that learning deepens and accelerates when individuals from a range of professional backgrounds and lived experiences contribute their insights and expertise to addressing the challenges in public education. Breaking down silos, building relationships, and engaging in collective learning enables the California Collaborative to thrive as a learning community. For a complete list of California Collaborative members, please see <https://cacollaborative.org/collaborative-members>.



The California Collaborative on District Reform, an initiative of American Institutes for Research, was formed in 2006 to join researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and funders in ongoing, evidence-based dialogue to improve instruction and student learning for all students in California's urban school systems.

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For more information about the Collaborative and its work, visit www.cacollaborative.org.