Getting Down to FACTS

Local Control in a Time of Change: The Work of California School Board Members

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Executive Summary

K-12 school boards have historically served as key institutions for establishing school district goals, strategies, and policies that reflect community needs. In California, they hold a particularly central role in a governance system that values local control, particularly around the allocation of resources. As political institutions, boards frequently face tensions in how to balance diverse stakeholder interests, electoral pressures, and systemic challenges within the educational landscape. Prior research and media narratives have demonstrated the many ways that boards are experiencing escalating conflicts and polarized educational environments in recent years, including the influence of national groups (e.g., Moms for Liberty) alongside longstanding internal challenges (e.g., labor-management conflicts and declining enrollment). Yet, there has been relatively limited research on the experiences of board members themselves, how they are navigating the current climate, and what if anything can be done to better support them.

As such, our study sought to better understand how board members navigate complex, rapidly changing sociopolitical contexts (e.g., shifts in federal oversight and resources, state-level mandates around ethnic studies) and what kinds of capacity-building and supports may help board members manage new realities and the ongoing challenges of school district governance. The findings outlined below draw on a sequential mixed-methods study that included a pilot qualitative study of 10 school board members (2023-24), a state-wide survey of 801 board members (2025), and follow-up interviews with 31 of the survey respondents (2025-26). This report focuses primarily on the data collected through the survey and follow-up interviews in 2025-26.

Overall, California school board members (SBMs) in our sample reported largely positive experiences and perceptions of their work. They expressed confidence in board operations, relationships with district leadership and constituents, fiscal conditions, student outcomes, and community engagement efforts in their districts. In some respects, these assessments appear strikingly optimistic, particularly when contrasted with the tone of recent media coverage of school board governance and public education in California and beyond.

That said, SBMs' positive assessments coexist with widespread strains. Although public discourse has often emphasized culture-war issues as a primary source of conflict in school governance, our findings suggest that these concerns are not the dominant challenge facing most boards in

California at present. Instead, fiscal pressures and the effects of recent federal policy decisions emerged as more immediate and consequential sources of stress. Declining enrollment, uncertainty surrounding federal funding, recent changes in immigration enforcement, and labor issues were said to be sources of strain impeding board progress. Additionally, roughly half of SBMs indicated that serving on the board had become more politically challenging than expected, often citing interpersonal conflict on the board. Many also reported persistent problems in ensuring meaningful and representative engagement from the community.

Despite their confidence in multiple areas, board members also expressed a clear desire for additional support. In particular, they cited needs related to navigating legal guidance on recent policy changes and social media dynamics and using data effectively for evaluation and decision-making. Importantly, SBMs emphasized that these supports should be locally-informed and/or differentiated based on need and context, and many expressed interest in expanded peer networks and cross-district learning as means of support.

Overall, findings related to race, as well as state-local relations, were complex. While issues such as the teaching of race and racism were not widely reported as major challenges, and most members indicated confidence in their board's ability to work together to navigate hypothetical race-related issues, responses to an experimental survey question suggested potential greater challenges among boards in handling conflicts when they become racialized than when they are more race neutral. Similarly, members expressed mixed views about the role of the state in their work. While a large majority valued local control, many also expressed a desire for clearer guidance from the state, underscoring the ongoing ambiguity around the proper role of state leadership in local school governance.

Board members' future plans were often uncertain, with approximately half unsure about running for another term. For these members, re-election remained an unresolved decision, perhaps shaped by the growing demands and political complexity of board service, as those who experienced more or greater political challenges were more likely to say that school board service had negatively impacted their well-being and were less likely to say that they planned to pursue reelection. Counter to some common perceptions or narratives, relatively few members viewed board service as a steppingstone to higher political office.

Finally, study findings underscore the importance of context. What it means to govern and to serve as a school board member can vary substantially depending on the district, be it the size or location, electoral context, or community partisanship, to name just a few. Emerging consistently across our analysis, our findings highlight the dangers of overgeneralization and one-size-fits-all solutions to challenges. The diversity, scale, and complexity of California's educational landscape are clearly reflected in the experiences of those tasked with governing its schools. There are clear limits to what our survey allows us to say conclusively about differences based on district characteristics, but the results indicate a definite need to better understand variation in SBM experiences across the contexts in which they serve.

Ultimately, our research indicates a need to strengthen California's system of school boards. Realizing the vision of effective, locally controlled, democratically governed school districts will require attention to four key areas: electoral issues, public engagement, capacity, and the state's role in education governance. Policymakers might consider how to strengthen and diversify the pipeline for board service and examine opportunities to make the board role more manageable, particularly for members from underrepresented communities. Leaders might also work to increase public awareness of the board's roles and responsibilities, while providing guidance to district leaders on how to meaningfully engage the community. Further, state, regional and local leaders might consider establishing more comprehensive and differentiated professional learning opportunities beyond those meeting mandatory ethics and finance requirements, particularly around areas such as data use/evaluation, navigating conflict, as well as fiscal, legal, and labor issues. Finally, our findings suggest a critical, ongoing role for the state - particularly in facilitating the vision of local control spelled out by LCFF and ensuring that local board members can, in fact, govern in the face of the complex challenges facing their districts.

Introduction

For more than a decade, the state of California has invested heavily in a governance approach centered on local control. Under the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), local education agencies (LEAs) have considerable autonomy to use state funds to meet students' needs as spelled out in their Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs). School boards play an integral part in this system, not only approving LCAPs, but also ensuring that superintendents are held accountable for achieving local goals. Furthermore, they hold responsibility for implementing many state policies, approving curricula, and ensuring fiscal solvency.

In recent years, school boards have been under increasing strain. In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, they faced often-contested decisions around school reopenings, vaccine requirements, and mask mandates (Kitchens & Goldberg, 2024; Jacob, 2024; Valant, 2021). Soon after, some boards confronted heated debates over national "culture war" issues related to book bans, teaching of race, and LGBTQ+ issues (Bridgeforth & Pickett, 2026; Collins, 2023; Duarte & Fernandez, 2025; Knight-Abowitz & Hornbeck, 2025; Polikoff et al., 2022; Rogers et al., 2022; Saldaña, 2025; Walsh, 2024). Today, boards often continue to face difficult decisions related to declining enrollment and possible closures and consolidations (Daramola et al., 2026). The broader national context of partisan divides and increased polarization (Houston, 2024), as well as new federal policies surrounding immigration enforcement and possible funding changes, may have heightened these challenges (Gensterblum et al., 2026).

Though the media has frequently highlighted the conflicts and controversies in board meetings (Weber et al., 2025), there has been relatively little systemic research on the experiences of board members themselves, how they are navigating the current climate, and what more can be done to support them. With this in mind, our research team conducted a pilot study of 10 board members purposely sampled from districts across the state in 2023-24. Our goal was to gather a diverse set of board members whose experiences and perspectives could bring greater nuance to our understanding of local education governance in California. Pilot study data suggested that increases in recall elections, board turnover, and uncontested races represented potential symptoms of the previously described contemporary strains (Marsh et al., 2025). More generally, our study revealed that although these board members saw their roles in distinct ways and operated in very different contexts, they faced a

common set of challenges of navigating complex relationships, time burdens, limited capacity, demands to use data, shifting technology, political dynamics, and state policies (Marsh et al., 2025).

This Getting Down to Facts III report – and the study it draws on – builds on the findings from our pilot study to gain a broader and updated understanding of the experiences of board members. We designed a sequential, mixed-methods study using an online survey of California school board members that was administered statewide in the spring to early summer of 2025 and completed by over 800 participants, and follow-up interviews with a subset of survey respondents (n=31) in Fall 2025 and Winter 2026. In addition to investigating whether the experiences of our 10 pilot study board members reflected those of individuals statewide, we also set out to understand with greater depth the reported areas of need, the perceived impact of even more recent political challenges (e.g., recent federal actions), and how the current climate relates to affective outcomes and intentions to run for re-election. We address the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the characteristics of California school boards and school board members?

RQ2. How are board members experiencing and negotiating rapidly changing political, social, and cultural contexts?

a. How do they understand and experience their roles?
b. What challenges do they face?
c. What supports do they have and want?
d. How do these experiences, challenges, and supports relate to board members' intention to seek reelection, sense of efficacy, and reported well-being?

RQ3. How are board members engaging their communities, and to what extent do these forms of engagement inform decisions?

RQ4. How do board members use data? How do their perceptions of their districts' academic performance relate to actual student achievement outcomes?

Answers to these questions can inform important policy discussions around local governance in California. Given the key role school boards play in the state's overall approach to education policy and

oversight, this research offers important insights into how well local control is playing out on the ground and what more may be needed to ensure robust, locally governed education systems statewide.

We find that board members did not appear demographically representative of the communities they serve. They had higher levels of education and income, and were more likely to be white compared to the population as a whole. Overall, members generally reported favorable views of district operations, relationships with leaders, fiscal management, student outcomes, and community engagement. However, beneath this optimism, members expressed significant strains, pointing to declining enrollment, fiscal pressures, uncertainty around federal funding, new immigration policies, labor issues, and internal politics within boards. Many also reported difficulties achieving meaningful community engagement and indicated a need for greater support in several areas, including data use, evaluation, navigating social media, navigating political tensions, and understanding union contracts. Board members also highlighted tensions between the desire for clearer state guidance and local control. About half were unsure about seeking another term, and few viewed board service as a stepping stone to higher political office.

Finally, as we illustrate throughout the report, board members' experiences often appeared to differ markedly across district contexts, highlighting how local conditions shape governance and cautioning against one-size-fits-all solutions. However, we warn readers against drawing strong conclusions about differences between groups from our suggestive evidence, given that we did not oversample to ensure representativeness within subgroups of our sample. We encourage future researchers to explore similar questions in ways that allow for clearer inferences about differences in SBM experiences according to the features of the contexts in which they serve.

In the following sections of the report, we first provide a brief review of prior literature on the topic of school board governance, followed by background information on school boards in California. We then describe our research methods. The remainder of the report is organized around addressing the four research questions. In the conclusion, we draw on the research findings to suggest directions for future policy and practice.

Grounding the Study: School Board Governance

Locally elected school boards have been a component of the American education system for over 200 years (Danzberger, 1994; Kirst, 2004; Kirst & Wirt, 2009; Land, 2002; Tyack, 1974). School boards have been typically designed as small, locally elected governance structures that develop, set, and maintain policy for school districts (Collins, 2021; Kerr, 1964; Land, 2002). Although the vast majority of board members are elected, members are appointed in some relatively rare cases (e.g., Schueler, 2024). This "single-purpose" governance arrangement, where elected board members focus on the one issue of education policymaking, is unique relative to most policy areas that are governed by "general-purpose" institutions (e.g., city councils, mayors, state legislators, governors) covering a range of issues (Henig, 2013; Howell, 2005; Manna & McGuinn, 2013).

School boards do not, by intentional design, manage daily operations within schools, but their beliefs and values can be felt within schools through the superintendent that they hire, the policies they develop, and the rhetoric that they employ as they engage with their constituents (Blissett & Alsbury, 2018). Some empirical research has suggested that many boards defer much of the decision-making process to their district superintendent (Hoschild, 2005; Maranto et al., 2017; Hall Sutherland, 2020, 2023). Therefore, rather than serving as daily administrators for schools, their primary role has been to develop and make decisions about district-level policies (Danzberger & Usdan, 1994; Ford & Ihrke, 2020; Lutz, 1980). That said, recent research provides increasingly compelling evidence that the composition of the school board has important implications for the educational policies that are adopted and systemwide performance outcomes (Biasi et al., 2025; Fischer, 2023; Grissom, 2010; Honingh et al., 2020; Kogan et al., 2021; Macartney & Singleton, 2018; Sampson, 2024; Shi & Singleton, 2023).

Since their inception, boards have typically served as one of the closest forms of representative government for communities, albeit only directly accountable to the eligible voting population, which, over the last two centuries, has for a time historically excluded women and people of color. Even in more recent years, the electorates responsible for selecting board members are typically quite small relative to those selecting national or state-level officials, with voter turnout rates often in the low teens (Hartney, 2021). These electorates are often older, whiter, and more affluent than the communities these board members represent (Kogan et al., 2021). Low levels of citizen participation in

the electoral process–and the lack of representativeness of these electorates–has led to considerable debate regarding whether school boards should be in charge of the decision-making over schools. However, public support for local control over educational systems and the school board system of governance generally persists (Collins, 2021; Jacobsen & Saultz, 2012; Schueler & West, 2021).

Although school boards have long served as the policy-making bodies of K-12 school districts, the summer of 2020 and subsequent 2020-2021 academic year thrust many boards squarely into the public consciousness (Jones & Jones, 2022; Weber et al., 2025). Boards were typically the actors responsible for making controversial decisions about if and when to reopen schools for in-person learning amidst the COVID-19 pandemic (Hartney & Finger, 2021; Valant, 2020). Media reports of contentious board meetings across the U.S. became common as boards and community members openly grappled with issues of race, racism, equity, and justice (Collins, 2024; McKeon & Gitomer, 2024). Some of these challenges were due to the ongoing pandemic, while others were related to heightened awareness of racial injustice due to the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, among others. Debates over school resource officers in schools (Turner & Beneke, 2020), curricula focused on race and racism (Welton et al., 2023), and explicit acts of racism in schools often developed into crises that overran board meeting agendas in countless communities. These issues exacerbated lingering questions about the efficacy of boards and whether these democratic institutions should remain in charge of America's schools. While some observers have called for alternatives to board governance (e.g., Kogan, 2022), others have argued that the problems are not indicative of inherent failures of boards themselves but rather suggest the need for reforms to board governance structures and/or operations (e.g., Collins, 2021; White et al., 2023).

Background on School Boards in California

California is home to the largest statewide population of K-12 public school students in the United States. The state's public education system operates through approximately 1,000 local school districts and county offices of education, governed by more than 5,000 board members serving over 6 million students (California School Boards Association, n.d.). In this report, we focus solely on district school boards, not county boards. County boards of education, while directly responsible for overseeing a limited number of specialized schools (e.g., juvenile court schools, schools for the deaf

and the hard of hearing), are distinct from local district school boards and primarily exist to provide support and services to the locally governed districts.

Board Configurations. Local school boards typically consist of five to seven members, though the exact number varies by district based on local rules and historical configurations. Our analysis focuses solely on public boards, largely elected by registered voters and governed by state law, although other types of boards–for charter schools, private and independent schools, and others–do exist. Public board members are elected to four-year terms. Board elections are typically staggered so that some but not all seats are contested every two years. When vacancies occur outside of that schedule, boards appoint replacement members to serve until the next scheduled election.

Board Eligibility. Residency requirements for board members are set by the state. Board members must be at least 18 years old and a registered voter residing within the school district boundaries or, in trustee-area systems, within the specific sub-area of the district that they represent (see text box below on trustee vs. at-large electoral systems). State law permits boards to include student members who may participate in board discussions and receive course credit or limited financial compensation as determined by local board policy. Their votes on motions are recorded but do not count toward determining if they pass or fail.

Board Elections. As for the timing of board elections, in 2015 the Legislature passed legislation on local government elections, including those for school boards, requiring them to occur "on-cycle" years, meaning they would be held on the same date as other statewide elections if a previous election held on an "off-cycle" date resulted in a particularly low voter turnout (25% less than the average turnout across the last four statewide general elections) (Ballotpedia, n.d.). The intent of this law was, at least in part, to encourage greater and more representative participation in local elections by pairing them with elections for higher-level statewide offices, which tend to obtain substantially higher voter turnout rates (Anzia, 2014; Berry & Gersen, 2011; Hajnal, 2010; Kogan et al., 2018; Marschall & Lappie, 2018). However, critics of this move express concerns that on-cycle elections could increase the influence of partisanship and state and national political dynamics in the education policymaking space (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2025).

At-Large versus Trustee-Area Elections

School board election systems in California are either at-large, in which all voters in the school district cast ballots for all available seats, or by-trustee-area elections, where candidates run to represent smaller geographic areas within school districts and are elected only by voters living within those designated boundaries (Berkman & Plutzer, 2005). The California Voting Rights Act of 2001, which prohibits election systems that impair the ability of protected classes to elect candidates of their choice, prompted widespread transitions from at-large to by-trustee-area election systems across the state. Coreas et al. (2023) note that between 2002 and 2019, close to 200 school districts transitioned from at-large to trustee as districts with at-large systems were, and continue to be, more vulnerable to legal challenges alleging that geographically concentrated minority groups are being denied representation under such systems. Districts converting to trustee areas must follow specific procedures, including hiring professional demographers, conducting public hearings, and obtaining county committee approval for boundary maps. No local agency has successfully defended a challenge under the California Voting Rights Act to date, with jurisdictions that have contested claims ultimately paying settlement amounts or court judgments (Collingwood & Long, 2021; Coreas et al., 2023; Glasgow, 2025).

The Brown Act. The 1953 Ralph M. Brown Act is a California law that establishes the guidelines and parameters for transparency in how public officials–including K-12 school board members–make decisions. Key provisions include requirements for meetings to be open to the public, provide advanced notice of meeting agendas, facilitate opportunities for public participation, disclose individually recorded votes that occur in public, and abide by limits on what can be discussed in closed sessions.

Board Compensation. Though the state establishes maximum monthly compensation limits for board members based on district average daily attendance (ADA), it does not require that compensation be offered. Many boards do not compensate their members, who serve in a voluntary capacity. In districts that choose to do so, state law allows compensation ranging from $600 a month for districts with fewer than 1,000 students in attendance to $4,500 a month for districts with 60,001-250,000 attending students. The largest districts may establish compensation through local

charter provisions or compensation committees, allowing for higher payment levels than the standard statutory maximums. For example, an independent commission establishes salaries for board members in the Los Angeles Unified School District, who are the highest paid in the state, receiving $125,000 a year if they do not have other employment and $50,000 a year if they hold other jobs. Boards can increase compensation annually, if approved by the board, up to 5 percent of their current monthly rate – though in practice, it is not clear how often this occurs. Recent years have seen increased scrutiny of the low rate of board member compensation, with some districts revising policies within state law to reflect changing expectations and fiscal realities. Signed into law in October 2025, AB 1390 raised pre-existing caps on board compensation for the first time since 1984 (see Table 1).

Table 1. School Board Member Maximum Monthly Compensation in California

School District's ADA	Pre-AB 1390 Limits	Post-AB 1390 Limits (Effective January 1, 2026)
	$60 (less than 150 ADA)	
1-1000	$120 (151-1000 ADA)	$600
1,001-10,000	$240	$1,200
10,001-25,000	$400	$2,000
25,001-60,000	$700	$3,000
60,001-250,000	$1,500	$4,500

Note: Table recreated from Association of California School Administrators. (2026, January 9). *Legislature significantly increases statutory ceiling on compensation for school board members.* https://content.acsa.org/legislature-significantly-increases-statutory-ceiling-on-compensation-for-school-board-members/

Evolving Responsibilities of Boards. Expectations for California school boards have shifted over the past six decades from primarily administrative oversight functions to broader policy leadership responsibilities. In the 1960s and 70s, board roles often revolved around basic operational decisions, including personnel hiring, budget approval, and facility management (Henrikson, 2019). The standards-based reform movement of the 1990s expanded board responsibilities to include academic accountability, with boards required to adopt academic performance targets and monitor student achievement data. The accountability era introduced under the federal No Child Left Behind Act further

emphasized board oversight of school performance, requiring boards to approve improvement plans for underperforming schools and make decisions about restructuring options. Board members – in California and beyond – now report that they must negotiate teacher contracts, approve budgets, select curricula, and set district policies (Blazar & Schueler, 2023; Houston & Hartney, 2025; Marsh et al., 2025). The California School Boards Association (CSBA) also defines a starting point for these responsibilities: setting direction through vision and goals, establishing structure through policies and superintendent hiring, providing support for the educational program, ensuring accountability through monitoring and evaluation, and exercising community leadership (California School Boards Association, n.d.).

Board Training. The state mandates training on ethics and K-12 public education finance laws, typically provided by the CSBA, which serves as the primary professional organization for board members in California. They provide governance training and professional development, and also play a political role encompassing both state-level advocacy and local governance support. County-level board associations (e.g., the Los Angeles County School Trustee Association) have also historically offered region-specific networking and professional learning opportunities. In recent years, several grassroots organizations have emerged to offer board members specific training that tends to be more politically partisan, ideological, or issue-focused in nature (e.g., the Local Progress Impact Lab, the Pacific Research Institute).

Policy Environment. Several recent policy changes at the state level have particular relevance for SBMs and their governance responsibilities. These include updated Brown Act provisions affecting remote meeting participation (e.g., SB 707 in 2025), expanded board responsibilities for approving local control and accountability plans (e.g., AB 130 in 2021, AB 1078 in 2023, and AB 1808 in 2024), monitoring implementation of new graduation requirements (e.g., AB 101 in 2021), and oversight over district responses to state academic and financial accountability measures. Board members are also required to update policies to align with state policy on student privacy protections (e.g., AB 1955 in 2024), while also completing ethics training (AB 2158 in 2022).

Recent research suggests that board members face an increasingly complex and challenging policy environment (Knight-Abowitz, 2025; Saldaña, 2025; Willoughby et al., 2025). While recent state policy changes have increased the minimum number of citizens required to trigger a recall election,

there have been several recent high-profile recall campaigns, including that of three San Francisco Unified School District board members in February 2022. This marked the most prominent statewide recall election involving SBMs in recent years, and focused on the board's handling of school reopening during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as decisions regarding school renaming initiatives, drawing national attention and significant financial contributions from both supporters and opponents.

Level of Competition in Local Elections

Data on school board races in California indicate that a substantial portion of school board positions face no electoral competition - a trend that is not unique to California (Hess & Leal, 2005; Kogan, Lavertu & Peskowitz, 2025). An October 2024 analysis by EdSource found that 56% of school board races in California did not appear on the ballot because either no one was running or one candidate was running unopposed, and this was particularly true for rural areas (Lambert & Willis, 2024). The prevalence of uncontested races may have implications for democratic representation and community engagement in local governance, as voters in these districts have limited opportunities to influence board composition through competitive elections. On the other hand, lack of competition could be useful for the purpose of recruiting candidates to run for what are often largely volunteer positions. If no candidates run for an open seat, or when board vacancies arise midterm, such as through resignation, state law allows boards to appoint a replacement to serve until the next scheduled election or to call a special election. If the seat is not filled within a 60-day period, the county superintendent is required to call the election.

Study Methods

To further understand the characteristics, experiences, challenges, and needs of California school board members in the recent policy environment, this report draws on a sequential mixed-methods study (Creswell & Clark, 2017) for which data were collected from 2023 to 2025. Pilot case studies allowed us to study individual board members as clearly bounded cases, while situating their experiences in a broader context (Saldaña & Omasta, 2021; Yin, 2002). These case studies

provided the foundation for the subsequent statewide survey and follow-up interviews with board members. We describe these three sources of data next.

Case Studies

In 2023-24, we conducted a pilot study of 10 SBMs recruited to capture a diversity of perspectives and local contexts. The participating members came from districts varying in size, location, and context (e.g., rural, suburban, urban; partisan context). The participants also differed in gender, age, race/ethnicity, occupation, and years of experience in their position. Additionally, we tried to engage with board members across a political spectrum in terms of their stated partisan affiliations. Our goal was not to select a sample or generate findings generalizable to all boards across California, but instead to identify a diverse set of individuals whose experiences and perspectives could bring greater nuance to our understanding of local governance and to generate tentative propositions and hypotheses we could eventually test with a larger sample via surveys and follow-up interviews.

Data collection included 1) two 60–90 minute interviews conducted in fall 2023 and late spring 2024, respectively, 2) "audio diaries" using the secure messaging application Voxer, approximately every 2–3 weeks that asked participants to reflect on various themes and questions presented in prompts, 3) websites and media, and 4) board meeting observations. To analyze these data, we coded all transcripts and meeting notes using Dedoose, met regularly to ensure consistency in our analysis, and wrote memos summarizing findings and themes emerging across the 10 participants. We also shared findings of the broader study with participants (who joined anonymously) in two webinars to elicit feedback on our analysis and ensure results accurately reflected the experiences they shared with us.

Detailed results of these case studies are reported elsewhere (see link). In this report, we draw on these pilot data to frame our inquiry and provide qualitative examples that help bring to life survey findings, which are the primary focus herein.

Survey

We administered an online survey to a near-census of the state's board members. The purpose of this survey was to investigate whether the experiences of our pilot interviews reflected those of the state as a whole and to address the key research questions with greater depth and generalizability. Importantly, the survey was fielded from May to July of 2025 during a period of significant political

transition, as a new federal administration under President Trump had taken office months before the survey administration which likely shaped the political environment in which board members were operating and responding to the survey.

Survey Development. Pilot study results formed the basis for our development of the survey instrument. Our findings indicated that members were facing challenges in seven key areas: navigating complex relationships, time required to serve, issues of training and capacity, data use and evaluation, impacts of shifting technologies, national and local politics, and policy or structural constraints. Nearly all SBMs in our pilot identified community engagement, superintendent oversight, and supporting academic achievement as key to their roles. Yet they also expressed the growing importance of managing crises, insulating the district from external political pressures, and navigating state policy contexts and legislative directives. As discussed in our report, a typology of board member roles emerged including four role types: 1) The Changemaker, 2) The Champion, 3) The Rule Follower, and 4) The Representative.

As we designed the survey, we developed items that spoke to these findings. For example, items in the first section were directly related to our typology of board member roles (e.g., Celebrating leaders, educators and staff, attending events, and visiting schools were associated with the Champion typology; Advancing goals related to educational justice was associated with Changemakers). Similarly, items focused on sources of tensions, strains, or conflicts within their communities included options guided by national politics (e.g., transgender policies, teaching about race, changing federal policies) and local politics (e.g., labor union issues). We also developed new items to capture potential outcomes related to re-election, well-being, and efficacy. Throughout the survey development process, we regularly sought feedback from content experts (current/former SBMs), state policy leaders/advocates, and survey methodologists. Our team also conducted a series of cognitive interviews (n=4) (Desimone & Le Floch, 2004) to better ensure survey validity and reliability. The full survey instrument is provided in Appendix A.

Survey Sample. To gather our survey data, we obtained a near-complete list of California SBMs and their email addresses, as of spring 2025, from the organization Ballotpedia. Our team supplemented this list with our own tracking of SBMs names and contact information from school board websites for a small subset of districts where the information was missing in the Ballotpedia

data. Ultimately, our survey was distributed via email to 4,587 SBMs and administered through Qualtrics. We sent out reminders to this list to increase our response rate and advertised the survey through our professional networks, regional trustee associations, and EdSource, a California-focused media outlet. Our ultimate analytic survey sample includes the 801 SBMs who responded to our survey, for a response rate of 17.5%. This is higher than typical response rates for surveys of school board members specifically, which tend to be around 9-10% (e.g., Bertrand, Perera, Valant & Zerbino, 2025; Houston & Hartney, 2025; Kitchens & Goldberg, 2024) and is comparable to response rates for elected officials more generally (e.g., Campbell & Lovenduski, 2015; Weinberg, 2020).

Sample Weighting. We describe the resulting sample in more detail below in response to our first research question regarding the characteristics of California SBMs. As we note, we are not able to determine whether our sample of SBMs is representative of the full universe of SBMs in the state, as, to our knowledge, there is no comprehensive source of data on the characteristics of the full census of SBMs statewide. Therefore, we cannot adjust our sample of members to be representative of all members in the state, nor are we able to conclusively determine how representative (or non-representative) our sample is of the full universe of SBMs in California. This is particularly important in cases where only one member from a given district responded to our survey given we are not able to document whether members who responded to the survey were or were not systematically different from those who did not.

That said, we can compare the school districts represented in our sample to the full set of districts in the state. As we detail below, our sample of districts is not perfectly representative. Therefore, we generated a set of survey weights using a raking technique, which iteratively estimates weights across a set of specified variables known for the population as a whole, repeating the process for each variable until the sample matches the broader population as closely as possible on the specified dimensions (Bailey, 2024; Pasek et al., 2014). In this case, we generated the weights based on the overall size of the district in terms of K-12 student enrollment, the share of the district's students that qualified for free or reduced lunch, and whether the district was classified as urban, rural, suburban, or as a town. We describe below the resulting improvements the weights made to the representativeness of the sample. In all analyses where we report overall results, we use these raking

weights to ensure the sample of districts contributing to our analysis is as representative of the state as possible.

We note that typically our results represent the experiences for the average district or school board rather than for the average student. In other words, most of our results are not weighted directly based on district size (i.e., the number of students enrolled in each district). We default to this approach given our research questions are focused on the board member experience. That said, one disadvantage of this approach occurs when survey responses vary significantly for members in large versus small districts. For example, we find that 78% of members in our sample identify as white. However, large districts are more likely to both be represented by non-white members and are more likely to be serving larger concentrations of non-white students. If we account for district size, this number is reduced to 68%—still a disproportionate share but not quite as extreme as the district-level number (78%). Therefore, we report out some selected statistics after weighting for district size and flag these exceptions in the tables and text. The means after weighting for district size can be interpreted as representing the average student in the state (e.g., 68% of students in California are represented by a white board member).

Additional Data Sources. We link our survey data with several other sources of data. First, we rely on the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Common Core of Data (CCD) for school district-level information from the 2024-25 school year on the number of students enrolled in each district, the share of the student population identified as African American, Asian, Hispanic, and White, the share of the district's students that qualifies for free or reduced priced meals, the district locale type (i.e., urban, rural, suburban, town), the percent of the district enrolled in charter schools, and district average per pupil expenditures. Next, we incorporated information on whether each respondent was a member of a school board that is currently elected on an at-large basis versus by-trustee-area drawn from the Ballotpedia data on all SBMs in California. We also relied on the Stanford Education Data Archive (SEDA) for information on the 2023-24 performance of school districts on statewide standardized math and reading assessments. These numbers are standardized using the full nationwide sample of districts and are presented in standard deviation (SD) units. Therefore, a zero represents the national average, while negative numbers represent districts scoring below the national average and positive numbers above the national average.

Finally, we generated a measure of the partisan vote share for each school district that we used to examine the differences in survey responses by the political leanings of a given community. To construct the measure at the school district level, we used geographic data from the California Department of Education (CDE), collected as part of the federal School District Review Program (SD, RP), and election results downloaded from the Statewide Database, the official redistricting database for California. Because voting data are reported at the precinct level, we used geographic information system (GIS) methods to aggregate precinct-level vote totals to match school district boundaries, which were retrieved from the CDE website. Precinct and district boundaries rarely align perfectly (Shepardson et al., 2026). Our method addressed this boundary mismatch by calculating what proportion of each precinct's area falls within each district, then distributing that precinct's votes proportionally across the districts it touches. Once districts were assigned the appropriate partisan voter share, we designated the district as "Red" or "Blue" if Republican or Democrat voter shares were 55% or larger, respectively, and "Purple" if neither share exceeded this threshold.[1]

Survey Analysis. Most of our analyses are descriptive in nature, presenting weighted percentages of respondents providing each possible answer choice by item. We describe the exceptions here. We conducted a series of subgroup analyses, examining responses separately based on a handful of district characteristics and individual board member characteristics, and testing whether these differences were statistically significant at the 0.05 level. For district characteristics, we compared results for majority-white versus non-majority-white communities, majority-qualifying for subsidized meals versus non-majority-subsidized, below versus above average test-based performance, locale type (city, rural, suburban, town), district size (small, medium, large), whether the district holds at-large vs.

[1] A simple assignment of each precinct to its primary district would either lose votes from boundary precincts or arbitrarily assign all votes to one district, biasing the resulting measures. Instead, we employed an area-weighted apportionment method to calculate the exact overlap area between each precinct-district pair. We then used each precinct's total area as the denominator to determine what fraction of that precinct falls within each district boundary, allowing us to proportionally distribute vote counts across all districts that a precinct touches. For example, if 70% of a precinct's area lies within District A and 30% within District B, we assigned 70% of that precinct's votes to District A and 30% to District B. This approach preserves the total vote count from each precinct while appropriately accounting for cross-boundary spatial relationships. Several limitations should be noted. First, this approach assumes voters are distributed evenly across a precinct's geography, which may not hold in areas with uneven population density or where residential areas cluster in specific parts of a precinct. Second, we consolidated precincts that were split into multiple non-contiguous pieces to avoid double-counting votes, but this required assuming all pieces of a split precinct share the same voting patterns. Finally, small measurement errors may arise from imperfect boundary alignment in the source shapefiles or rounding in area calculations, though we minimized these through quality checks comparing apportioned totals to original precinct totals. See Appendix for additional technical notes.

trustee elections, and the partisan makeup of the district (Blue, Red, Purple). For member characteristics, we examined differences by gender (women versus men), white versus non-white, Democrat versus non-Democrat, the competitiveness of the seat (whether the member reports running opposed versus unopposed in their last election), and member experience (whether a member reports having served for less than six years on the board versus having served six or more years).

We want to be clear that we view all subgroup results as suggestive rather than conclusive and urge readers to avoid over-interpreting these results, which would need to be more rigorously studied and replicated to provide confidence in the robustness of these differences. That is for at least three reasons. First, the survey sample was not designed to allow for subgroup comparisons but rather to give a sense of the state of California SBMs statewide. Our resulting sample, after weighting, is representative of the state but not necessarily of the individual subgroups within the state. In other words, although the weighted sample may be representative of all SBMs in the state, the group of at-large members who responded to the survey may not be representative of all members in at-large districts across the state. This is especially important because in many cases, our sample of SBMs within a subgroup can be very small.

A second challenge is that we have over 50 items on the survey and have explored and described 12 subgroup differences; we have tested a large number of hypotheses and are therefore very susceptible to drawing false positive conclusions by random chance. To account for multiple comparisons within each subgroup analysis, we applied the Benjamini-Hochberg (BH) false discovery rate (FDR) correction (Benjamini & Hochberg, 1995) to all p-values tested within each grouping comparison (e.g., all outcome variables compared between majority non-white and majority white districts). FDR-adjusted p-values are reported alongside unadjusted p-values; the BH procedure controls the expected proportion of false discoveries within each family of tests rather than the probability of any single false positive. In Stata, unadjusted p-values were first obtained via two-sample t-tests (ttest) for binary subgroup comparisons and one-way ANOVA (anova) for comparisons across three or four groups. FDR correction was then applied within each family of tests using the *qqvalue* command (Newson, 2010) with the Simes method, which implements the BH procedure. We report corrected p-values in the appendix tables and focus in the report text on differences that are robust to the correction.

Third, we have non-trivial rates of missingness on item responses. Combined with the small sample sizes for subgroups overall, this can make the between-group comparisons based on very small samples. For all these reasons, we caution readers from drawing strong conclusions based on the subgroup differences reported here. That said, we examined differences across subgroups to assess whether there is suggestive evidence of between-group differences that we hope scholars will explore in a more rigorous way in the future.

Follow-up Interviews

We conducted a follow-up round of interviews with California board members from October 2025 to January 2026, exploring in greater depth three challenges for SBMs that emerged in the survey results: state-local tensions, recent federal actions, and re-election intentions. We drew our sample from individuals who completed the survey. At the end of the survey, SBMs were asked if they wanted to participate in a voluntary follow-up interview that would include a $25 gift card for participation. A total of 315 individuals volunteered. From this group, we selected a sample of 10-11 to include in each set of the three "deep dive" categories, based in part on participants' responses to survey items:

- **Federal Issues:** We interviewed respondents who expressed that uncertainty about federal funding or immigration enforcement was impacting their district to a large extent (n=11).
- **State-Local Tensions:** We interviewed respondents who either desired more state-level guidance to achieve board goals or who believed that state-level policies constrained their ability to be responsive to community needs (n=10).
- **Re-election Intentions:** We interviewed respondents with a variety of responses regarding their intent to seek re-election, ranging from firm refusals to firm commitments to run again (n=10).

We also purposefully sampled to include individuals reflecting a range of variation in gender, race/ethnicity, experience, partisanship, geographic location, urbanicity, district size, and district type. We conducted follow-up interviews with a total of 31 members (see Table 2).

Table 2. Describing Follow-Up Interview Participants (n=31)

Category	Participant Counts
Region	Bay Area (10), Central Coast (2), Central Valley (2), Inland Empire (2), Northern (4), Southern (11)
District Size	1,000-5,000 students (11), 5,001-10,000 (8), 10,001-20,000 (9), 20,001-40,000 (3)
Urbanicity	City (11), Rural (3), Suburban (12), Town (5)
Service	1 year or less (5), 2-5 years (10), 6-10 years (7), 11-20 years (7), More than 20 years (2)
Partisanship	Democrat (15), Republican (6), Independent/No preference (10)
Gender	Man (12), Woman (19)
Race/Ethnicity	Asian (5), Black, Hispanic, or Latino (6), White (20)

The interview protocols probed the nature of these challenges and the reasons why SBMs responded the way they did on the survey. For example, during our initial analysis of survey responses, we identified challenges related to increased federal immigration enforcement as a key area for exploration. Therefore, prior to each interview focused on federal issues, we reviewed the participant's survey responses to the question about immigration and tailored our questions to their responses. In this example, we might have asked "In your survey response, you noted moderate concerns about changing federal immigration enforcement policies. What are your specific concerns or what have been your experiences with this?". We used a similar process for each of the three deep dive categories. While we primarily analyzed these data to better understand board members' perspectives on state-local tensions, recent federal policies, and re-election intentions, we also analyzed interview transcripts to learn more about topics such as their motivation for serving, training and opportunities for support, and their ideas for improving board service.

All interviews were conducted via Zoom and were transcribed, cleaned, and analyzed using data matrices to compare across each participant's responses (Bush-Mecenas & Marsh, 2018). This process allowed us to comparatively examine each participant's responses to understand how these issues were impacting board members' perceptions of their experiences (e.g., why they did or did not plan to seek re-election or how concerns about federal policy shifts were impacting their work). Though we focused each set of 10 interviews on one of the three categories, conversations often touched on one if not both other categories (e.g., conversations about re-election sometimes turned to tensions between state and local control). For this reason, our analysis and presentation of findings on each "deep dive"

draw on data from any of the 31 SBMs who spoke about that topic. Interviews also spanned many topics that extended beyond the 3 deep dive categories. As such, we also draw on all 31 interviews throughout the report to help bring to life findings generated from the survey analysis.

Findings

RQ1. What are the characteristics of California school boards and board members?

To address this research question, we primarily rely on data from the statewide survey of board members. As we describe next, members responding to our survey represent a wide range of districts and individual backgrounds. However, the characteristics of the SBMs were not representative of the populations they serve, as one might expect based on prior literature on the characteristics of public servants at the local level (Houston & Hartney, 2025).

School District Characteristics. As illustrated in Table 3, we received a total of 801 responses from 478 school districts. This represents just over half (51%) of the districts in the state. One important question is whether our survey sample is representative of the state as a whole, since this is the population of interest. The districts in our survey sample (described in column one) were generally representative of the full universe of districts in the state (described in column three). However, there were some notable differences:

- The districts in our sample were somewhat larger (8,845 students on average) than the average for the state (6,051 students on average).
- Rural districts were underrepresented (25% rural in the sample compared to 40% in the state as a whole). Suburban districts were overrepresented (40% in our sample versus 29% statewide).
- Sample districts also had a somewhat lower share of students qualifying for subsidized lunch (55%) than the state as a whole (58%).

Given these differences, as described in the methods section above, we weight our sample when reporting out overall findings to ensure results are representative of the full set of California districts. Column two of Table 3 describes the weighted sample, illustrating this strategy indeed makes the sample more similar on key dimensions to the statewide sample (described in column three).

Table 3. Describing School Districts in the Survey Sample

	Survey Sample		Statewide Sample
	Unweighted	Weighted	
Number of students	8844.50	5916.86	6051.10
Percent African American	3	2	2
Percent Asian	8	6	6
Percent Hispanic	47	47	48
Percent White	32	34	34
Percent Free or Reduced Meals	55	59	58
City	20	15	15
Rural	25	38	40
Suburban	40	28	29
Town	15	18	16
Percent Charter Enrollment	8	8	9
Per Pupil Expenditures	21458	22603	22563
Standardized Math Scores	-0.19	-0.28	-0.24
Standardized Reading Scores	-0.18	-0.26	-0.24
Number of districts	478		937
Number of observations	801		
Number of respondents per district	1.68 (min=1, max=5)		

Note: All variables represent the 2024-25 school year except for the per pupil expenditures and test score data which are from 2023-24. The expenditures and test score variables are missing for ~15% of the sample. The statewide sample is using all elementary, high school, and unified districts in the CDE public data (after dropping county offices, occupation centers, state boards, statewide charters, etc.). The California School Board Association (CSBA) reports a total of 4,964 school board members in the state, with an average of 5.32 members per district. Our sample therefore includes ~51% of districts and ~16% of school board members in the state.

Individual Board Member Characteristics. In Table 4, we describe the sample of school board members who responded to our survey, drawing here on their individual characteristics rather than characteristics of their districts. It is difficult to determine the extent to which the board members who ended up in our sample are representative of the full population of board members because, to our knowledge, there is no source of comprehensive data describing SBMs in the state that we could use as a benchmark. In some cases, we include data from other sources (in the "Public Data" column of Table 4) to provide rough comparisons between our sample and other state-level data sources. However, we note that these sources of data are also unlikely to be fully comprehensive and in some cases are likely outdated. That said, a few things stand out about the board members in our sample:

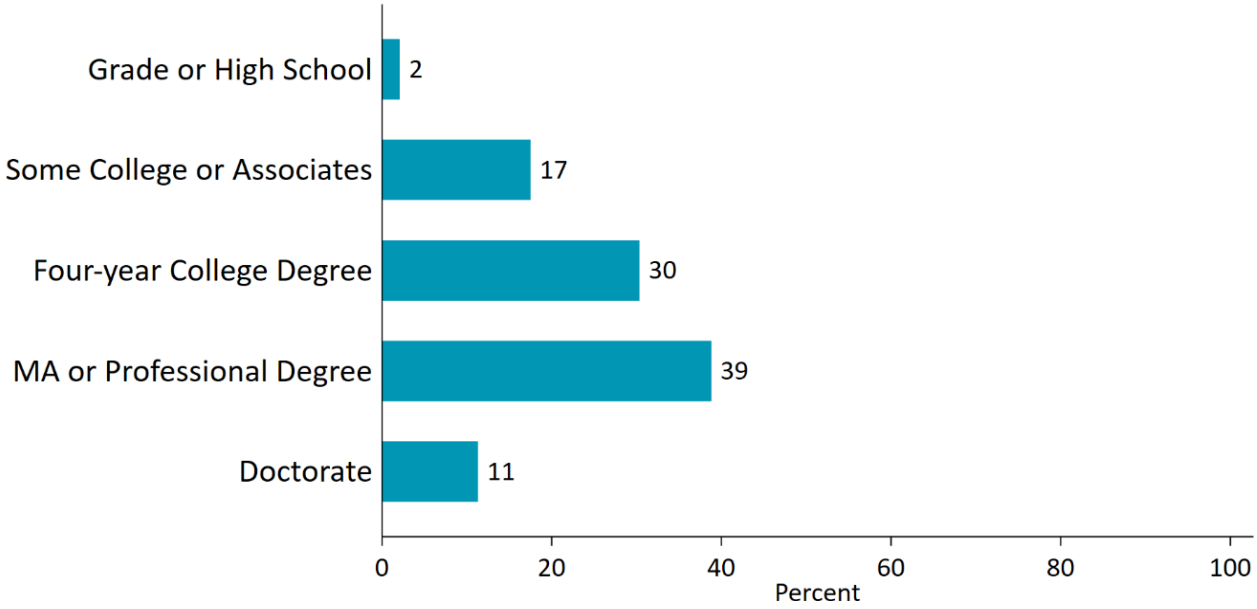
- They are highly educated. Fully 80% have at least a college degree – compared to roughly 38% of residents in the state as a whole – and over half have a graduate degree (see Figure 1).
- They report relatively high levels of income, with 44% reporting household income of $150,000 or more, as we also report in Figure 1.
- A large majority of the members are white (78%), as we show in Table 4. This number is somewhat smaller when we weight by district size. Specifically, we find that 68% of students in California are represented by a white board member (see the final column of Table 4). Yet even this number illustrates a lack of representativeness among board members in a state where only 34% of public school students are identified as white (see Table 3). This is consistent with what other scholars have found regarding the demographic differences between SBMs and the communities they represent (e.g., Kogan, Lavertu & Peskowitz, 2021; Houston & Hartney, 2025).
- Women are somewhat disproportionately represented among members (59%), consistent with prior research showing women have electoral advantages in local educational elections (Anzia & Bernhard, 2022), and a large majority (83%) are either current or former parents of students in the district where they are serving.
- SBMs in our sample tended not to have served for particularly long stretches of time–80% had served for 10 years or fewer, with the plurality (39%) having served between one and five years, and only 8% 20 years or more, as shown in Figure 2.

Table 4. Describing School Board Members in the Survey Sample

	Unweighted					Public Data	Weighted to Represent:	
							Statewide Population of Districts	Statewide Average Student
	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Mean	Mean	Mean
Percent of Survey Answered	801	85	33	4	100		85	87
Age	498	58	12	26	89		58	55
Woman	518	60	49	0	100	55	59	59
Current District Parent	519	39	49	0	100		39	43
Ever District Parent	519	84	37	0	100		83	84
Latino	506	18	39	0	100	25	17	27
Asian	483	6	23	0	100	5	5	6
Black	483	4	20	0	100	4	3	11
White	483	75	43	0	100	62	78	68
Other Race	483	15	35	0	100	3	14	15
Democrat	527	66	47	0	100		62	68
Education Occupation	463	24	43	0	100		24	34
College or Graduate Degree	519	83	38	0	100	73	80	87
Appointed	528	11	31	0	100		13	5
At-large Election	527	35	48	0	100	68	39	18
Ran Unopposed	460	40	49	0	100		45	27

Note: These data are at the respondent level. Weighting is to reflect the population of districts across the state (rather than board members). The final column is weighted based on district size to represent the average student (rather than district) experience. The public data come from the California School Board Association (CSBA) in 2024 except for the estimate of at-large elections which comes from Ballotpedia in 2022. In the survey data, Latino is its own variable, not mutually exclusive with racial categories for the survey data but it is mutually exclusive with the other race categories in the CSBA data. The sample size changes across rows due to varying rates of missingness (unanswered questions) across variables/survey questions.

Figure 1. Members' Educational Attainment (n=519) and Annual Household Income (n=456)



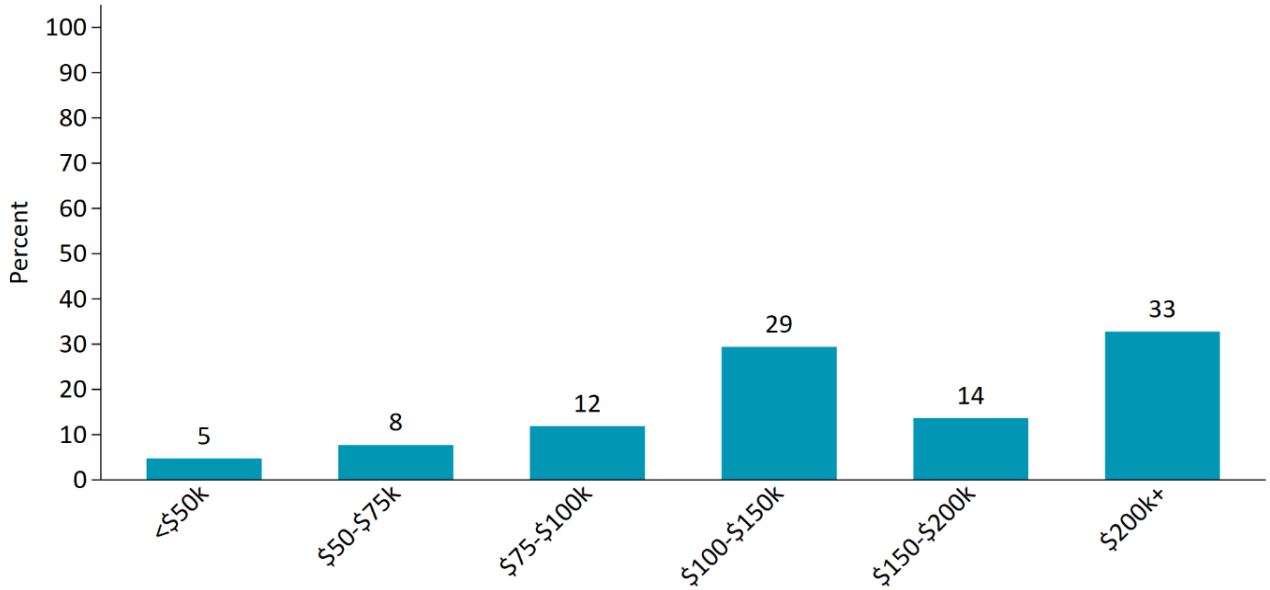
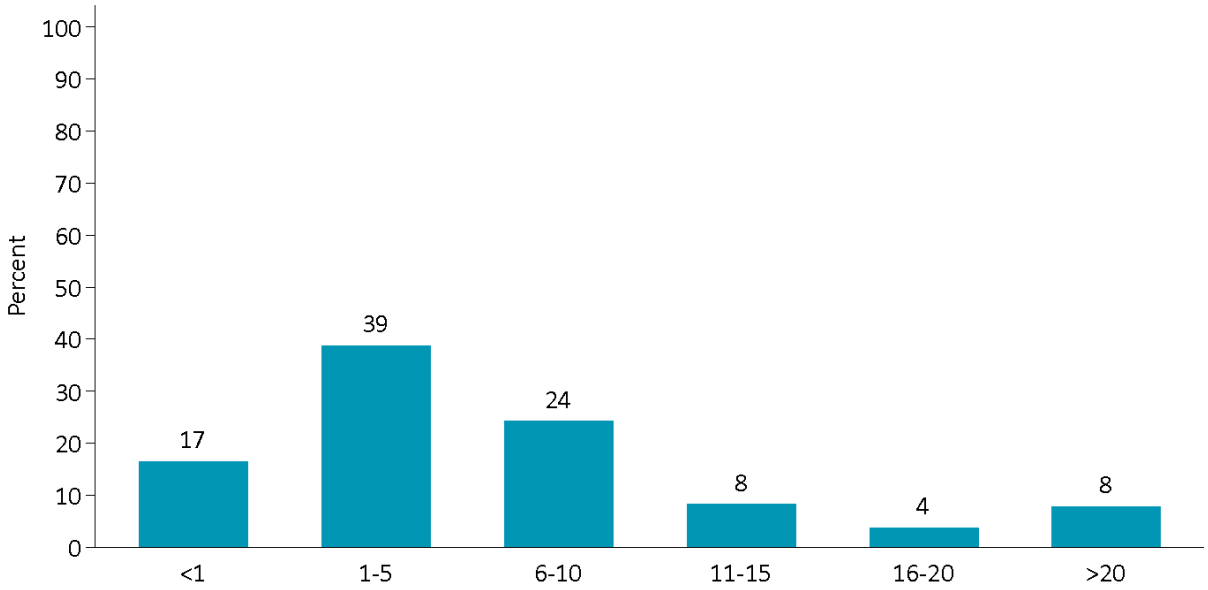


Figure 2. Members' Years of School Board Service (n=457)



RQ2. How are board members experiencing and negotiating rapidly changing political, social, and cultural contexts?

In the next section, we examine the experiences of school board members, including how they have understood and enacted their role (2A), the challenges they faced (2B), and the supports they received and wanted (2C). We conclude this section by exploring how these perceptions, challenges, and supports relate to SBM's intentions to seek re-election, as well as their sense of efficacy and reported well-being (2D).

Overall, we find that SBMs generally reported positive experiences serving on their boards regarding the operations of the board, their impact, their relationships, and the conditions of their districts. Yet, they also report significant strains on their districts, on their work as a board, and on themselves. Notably, fiscal challenges and recent federal policy decisions weighed heavily on their minds, and they felt many of these strains were impeding their work. Many also reported feeling the political challenges of serving and expressed less confidence navigating challenges when framed as race-related issues. Though many felt confident in their abilities to serve and had received training in a wide range of areas, large shares wanted more support in particular areas (e.g., data use and

evaluation, navigating social media) and in particular ways (e.g., local, differentiated, and potentially via networks).

(RQ2A) How do school board members understand and experience their roles?

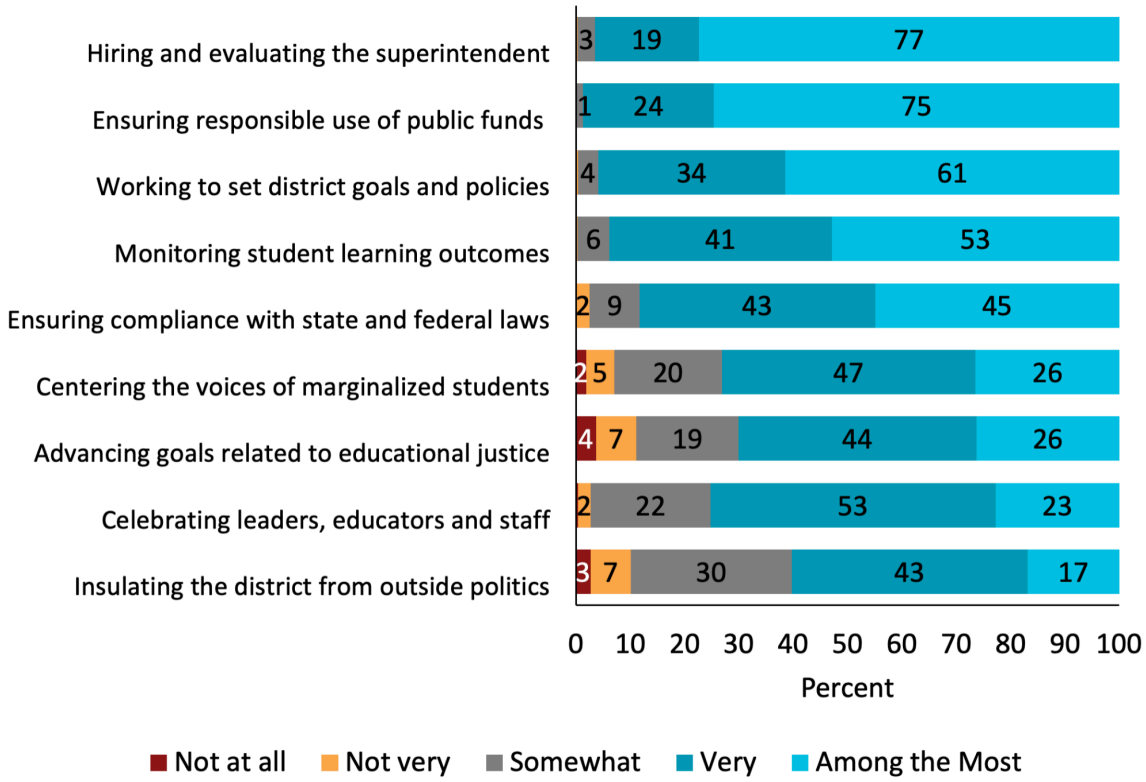
The CSBA lays out a set of roles and responsibilities for school boards that include setting the direction for their community's school system, establishing an effective and efficient structure for the district, creating a supportive environment, ensuring accountability to the public, and providing leadership as advocates for children, the schools, and the district (CSBA, n.d.). In our pilot study, we found that most SBMs shared a similar list with us when asked to describe their role. Yet they also tended to mobilize their efforts and expertise in the service of a higher purpose. Notably, several members identified as "Changemakers" who sought to challenge the status quo, often to address perceived inequities in the district.

Building on these ideas around what it means to serve, in the survey and follow-up interviews, we found that most SBMs agreed on their main roles (evaluating/hiring superintendent, providing fiscal oversight, and policy direction) and reported positive experiences on their boards. On average, they reported spending limited funds on their elections and limited time on their work as a board member. SBMs' ratings of their experiences also varied based on their local context.

SBMs' beliefs about their role generally align with the duties spelled out by the CSBA and research more generally. The majority of members identified accountability, compliance, fiscal stewardship, and setting direction as their key responsibilities. As Figure 3 illustrates, more than half reported the following as "among the most important" roles for the work of a school board: hiring and evaluating the superintendent (77%), ensuring responsible use of public funds (75%), working to set district goals and priorities (61%), monitoring student learning outcomes (53%), and ensuring compliance with state and federal laws (45%).

A minority of SBMs saw their roles as equity-focused, although this finding could be sensitive to question wording; that is, only 26% reported as among their most important duties, centering the voices of marginalized students and/or advancing goals related to educational justice. These equity-oriented SBMs were significantly more likely to be from districts with majority non-white student populations, and with a majority receiving subsidized lunch. They were also more likely to be women, non-white, and Democrats (see Appendix Tables A1a-c).

Figure 3. How Important Are the Following for the Work of the School Board? (n=725)



In general, we did not find differences in reported roles or duties based on SBM experience, with one exception: More experienced SBMs (those with six or more years of board service) were more likely than newer members to cite hiring and evaluating the superintendent as an important part of their role (see Appendix Table A2). Our qualitative data indicate that newer members often come into the position thinking about their role differently and, as some argued, naively:

> We have a lot of new board members that come in and…what they hope to accomplish is not realistic…We have some folks that get in thinking that they're going to control what happen[s] at the school, which, you know, doesn't work out that way.

Only after sitting on the board for some time do they come to realize that their main duty is, in fact, to hire and fire the superintendent. As one member explained, "The board really has one employee. It's the superintendent, and then the superintendent runs the district, and you set policy and hold the superintendent accountable… but not really much deeper than that."

School board elections tended to be low-spending affairs with limited competition. SBMs in our sample reported spending limited funds on their campaigns. As displayed in Figure 4, roughly half (49%) of all respondents said less than $100 was spent on their last board election, and only 6% spent $25,000 or more (with higher spending races concentrated in larger districts). This is consistent with the limited prior work documenting relatively low spending in school board races (e.g., Hess, 2002; Hess & Leal, 2005; Henig, Jacobsen & Reckhow, 2019). Additionally, nearly half of our respondents (45%) indicated that they ran unopposed in their last election. However, this finding varied significantly by district size. When we weighted by student enrollment, we found that only 27% of California students were represented by a member who ran unopposed (see the last column of Table 4). Interviewees emphasized the significant time commitment that running for a seat on the board required. Several members noted the amount of time spent doing "...a ton of door knocking [and] a lot of direct voter engagement."

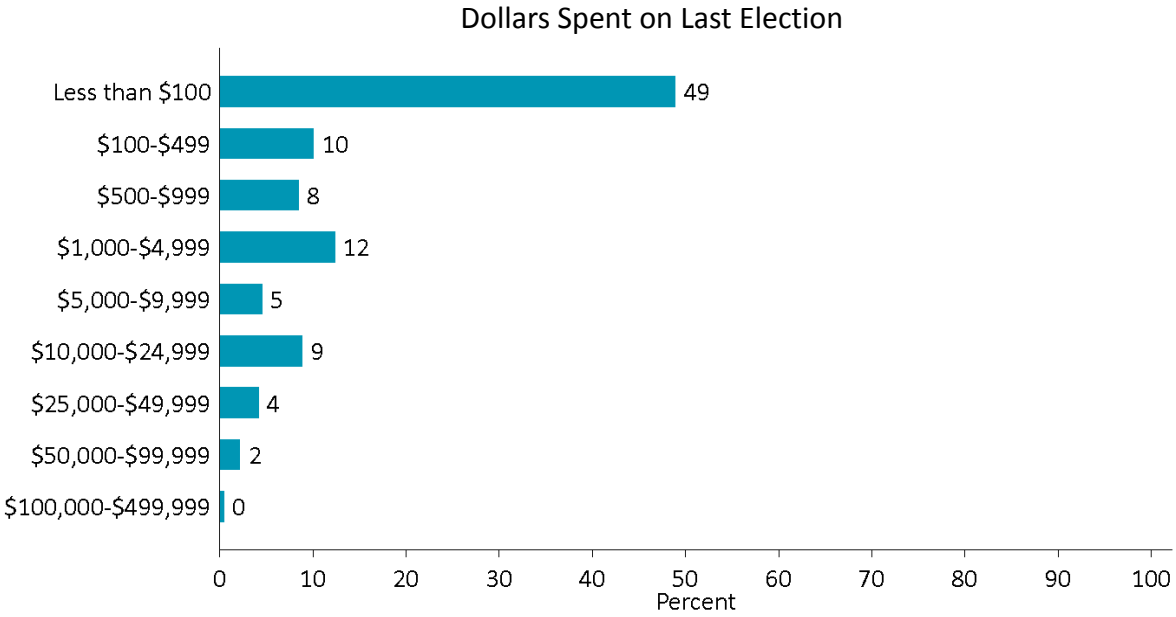
Though the majority of SBMs spent 20 hours or less monthly on board activities, some indicated much greater investments. Members reported devoting roughly 22 hours a month or less to the work, on average, although this varied quite a bit, ranging from 1-5 to 40+ hours per month (see Figure 4). More specifically, 64% of respondents reported spending 20 hours or less per month on board activities, with 30% spending 10 hours or less. Only 12% said they spent 40 hours or more per month on board duties. We illustrate these findings in Figure 4. Though the time commitment reported on surveys was fairly minimal, case studies and follow-up interviews indicated that many SBMs struggled to balance board commitments with their employment, other responsibilities, and their conception of what it takes to be an effective member. One SBM described the time-consuming nature of community engagement, sharing, "I really have to have town halls, which is time-consuming…it's hard to do all that." Another member noted that the time constraints and minimal compensation resulted in significant work for less than the federal minimum wage:

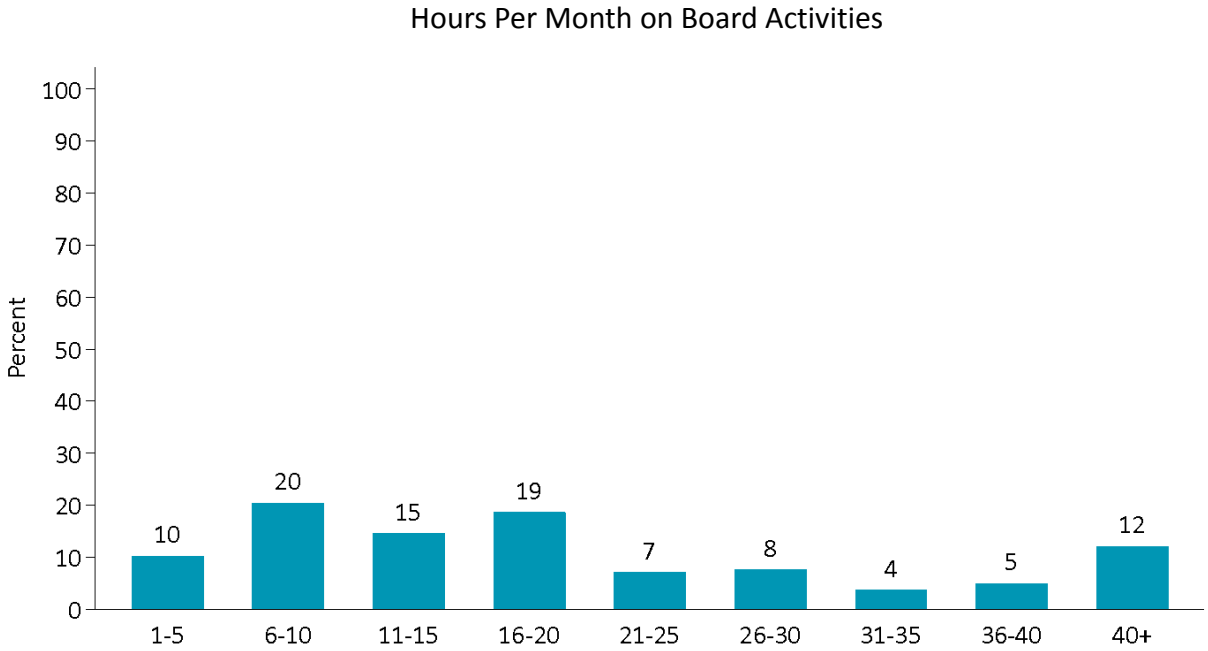
> At one point early on, I was keeping track of how many hours I was putting in and what I was getting paid…I've gotten a little bit more efficient now…but I evaluated that I was being paid $4.32 an hour for my school board work.

While this member acknowledged her ability to do this work because of her spouse's higher income, she also worried about the impact of these constraints on community representation, explaining,

"There are really good people in our community I would love to see run for these positions, but who cannot fiscally make that work. That means that school boards don't have representation from socio-economically disadvantaged community members."

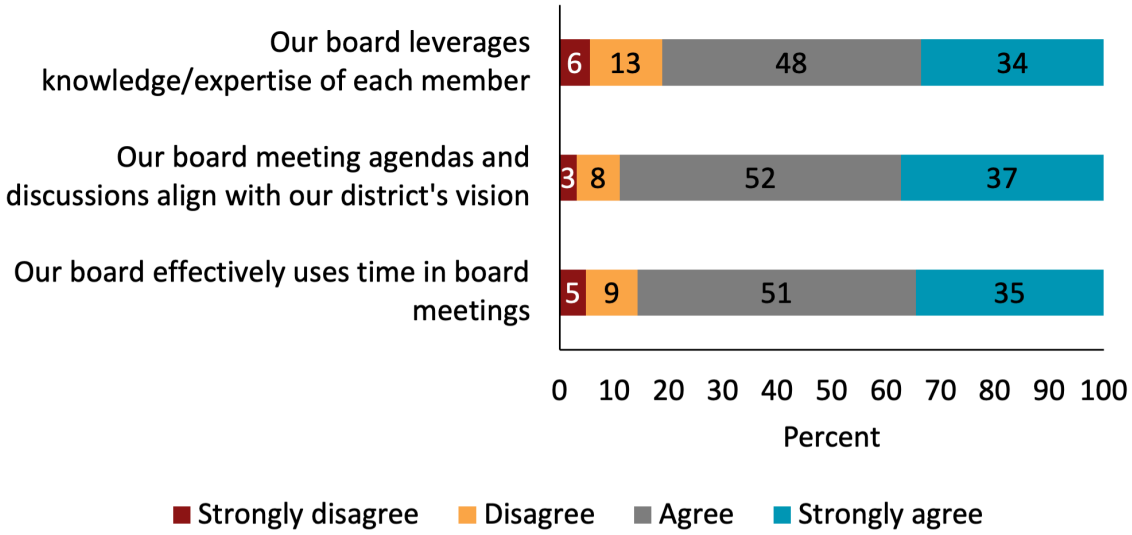
Figure 4. Members' Campaign Spending (n=457) and Time Spent on Board Activities (n=528)





SBMs generally reported positive school board operations. A large majority of members agreed or strongly agreed that their board uses time in board meetings effectively (86%), leverages the knowledge and expertise of each member to advance district priorities (82%), and that board meeting agendas and discussions are aligned with their district's vision (90%). See Figure 5.

Figure 5. Assessment of School Board Operations (n=596)



Though overall quite positive, SBMs in large districts were less positive about board operations than their counterparts in medium and small districts (Figure 6). We also found some lower ratings of board operations in city districts and districts with lower than average student achievement (See Appendix Table A3a-c).

SBM perceptions of their own individual impact were largely positive. As Figure 7 illustrates, large majorities of members agreed or strongly agreed that their perspectives help shape board decisions (91%), that they can make a difference in the well-being of students (90%), and that fellow board members respectfully listen to their opinions (88%). The majority of SBMs said they did not question whether their board work matters (66%). More experienced SBMs (those with six or more years of service) were slightly more likely than less experienced SBMs to perceive a positive influence on their boards (Appendix Table A2).

Figure 6. Assessment of School Board Operations, by District Size

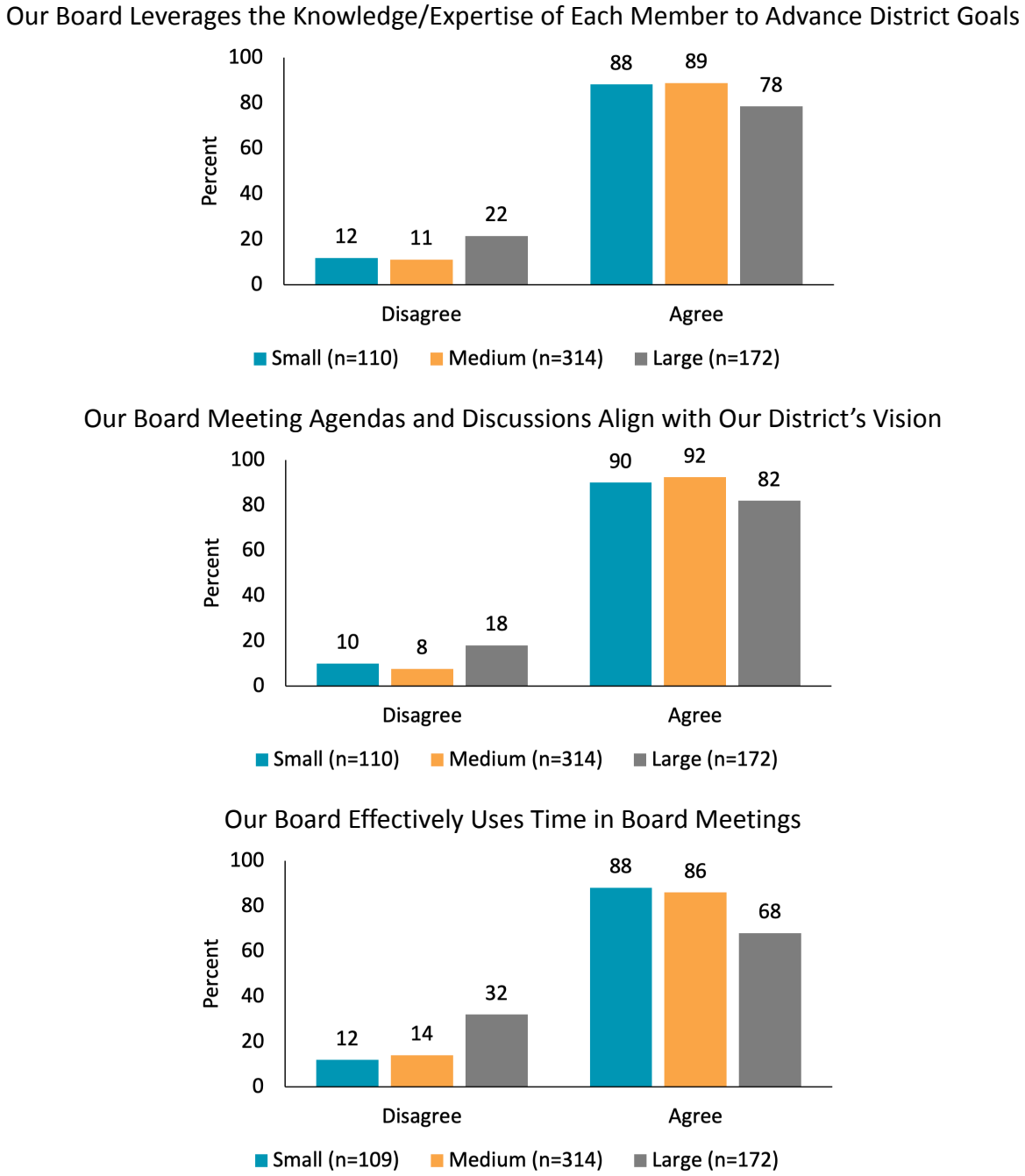
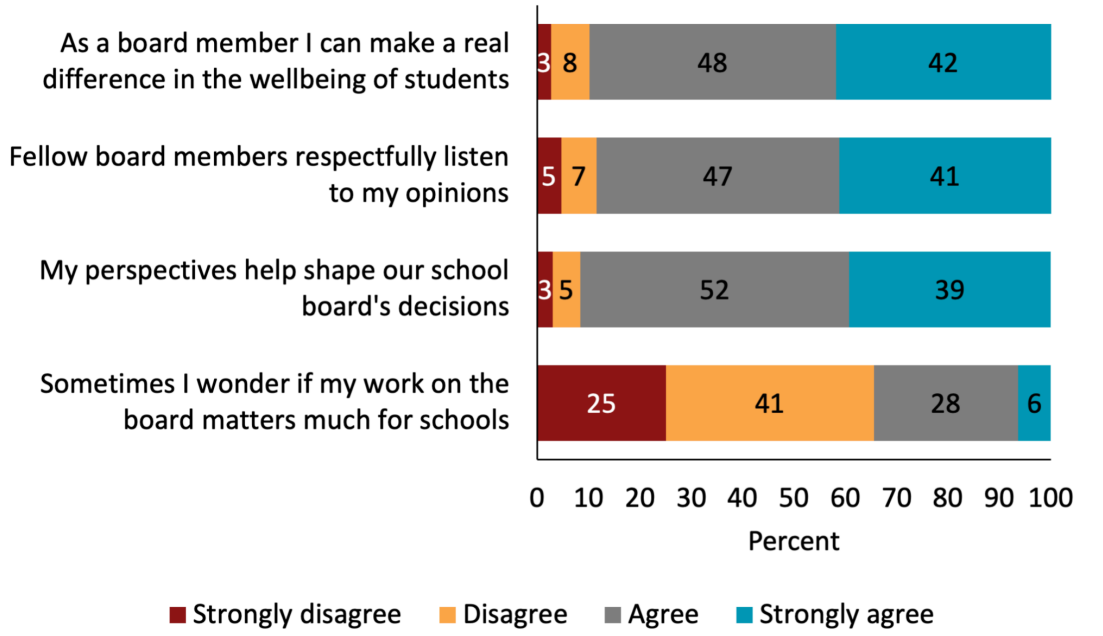


Figure 7. Self-Efficacy Among Board Members (n=597)



Electoral context may matter. Member assessments of board operations and perceptions of impact varied by the structure of the members' elections and the nature of their prior experience. SBMs who ran unopposed in their last election were more positive about board operations than those who ran opposed (Figure 8). This could be due to a range of explanations—the competition could have been off-putting for members running opposed, or it could be that challengers are more likely to generate electoral competition when board operations appear ineffective, or it could be that small districts tend to both have non-competitive elections and fewer issues with board operations. We are not able to identify which of these possibilities is driving the patterns we observe, given the correlational nature of our data. There are also many other potential explanations that we have not outlined here. Exploring these relationships in a more credibly causal framework would be a useful direction for future research.

Figure 8. Assessment of Board Operations and Self-Efficacy, by Election Competitiveness

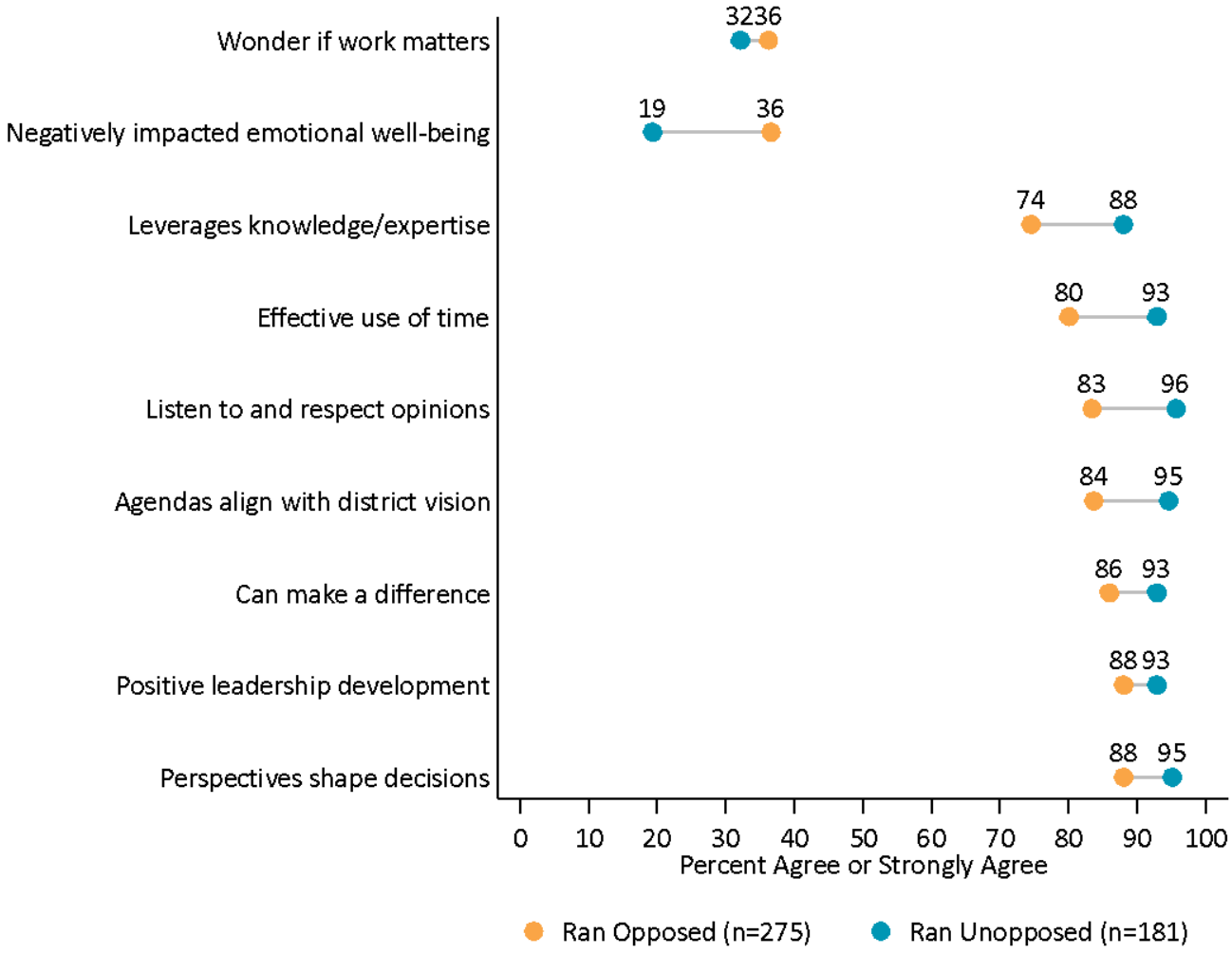


Figure 9. Assessment of Board Operations and Self-Efficacy, by Type of Electoral System

Relatedly, we find that SBMs serving in districts that elect members on an at-large basis generally reported more positive perceptions than their counterparts in districts using trustee elections (Figure 9). Some members explained that the shift to trustee area representation had led to negative experiences within their districts. Some members raised concerns about the relatively small number of votes it took to get elected in some trustee areas, noting potential unintended negative consequences. As one SBM shared, “You have a much smaller pool of trustee candidates to draw from, so you end up with a much larger number of uncontested elections," which could increase the chance of board members being elected who may not represent their community’s views or interests. Other members worried about trustee elections setting up “political fiefdoms” where you might have “one high school attendance area battling against another high school attendance area for things that they want.” In

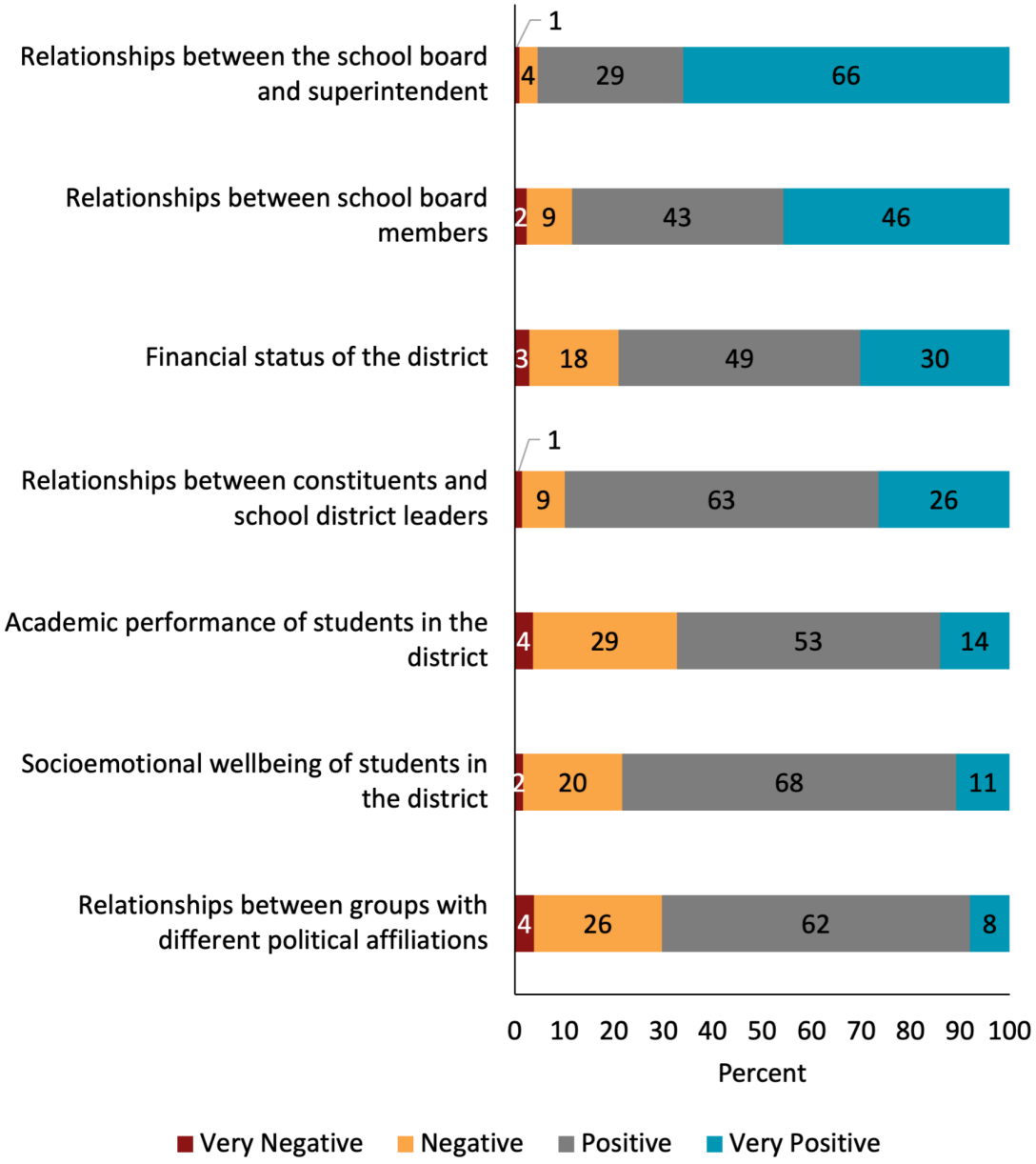
those cases, SBMs may feel "...beholden to the area that elected them…which puts trustees in a position of, 'Do I placate the people who elected me? Or do I do the right thing for the district as a whole?" Again, we note the limitations of our data for drawing inferences about why these descriptive patterns emerge but urge scholars to explore these themes in more detail going forward.

(RQ2B) What challenges do school board members face?

We also sought to understand how SBMs were navigating the changing socio-political context and broader challenges facing public education. Given widespread media coverage of national culture war issues playing out in board meetings and races – including issues related to the teaching of race, LGBTQ+ issues, and book bans – as well as policy changes coming from the federal level in early 2025, we examined how SBMs were experiencing these newer potential challenges alongside a list of evergreen potential tensions related to labor management relations, intra-board relations, and student enrollment.

Overall, despite positive perceptions of local district conditions, including student performance and well-being, SBMs reported challenges that were both fiscal and political. Strain stemmed from recent federal policy changes (e.g., immigration enforcement, executive orders) as well as more localized issues (e.g., enrollment declines, labor union disputes, interpersonal conflict), more often than national culture war issues. Findings also illustrated variation in SBMs experiences of these challenges, indicating again that context likely matters.

Figure 10. Characterizations of Conditions Within District Community (n=669)



Board members generally had positive perceptions of conditions in their own districts.

Members tended to rate conditions in their own district communities highly, as we show in Figure 10. A large majority said the academic performance of students in the district was positive or very positive (70%). This is perhaps surprising given the major declines in student academic achievement that persist in the aftermath of the pandemic. An even greater share characterized the socioemotional well-being of students in the district positively (79%). This also may be surprising given significant recent media coverage of a rise in mental health challenges among young people. Very large majorities indicated

positive relationships between the board and superintendent (95%), as well as relationships between board members (89%), and a majority (79%) also rated the financial status of their district positively. The condition members rated the least positively was relationships between groups with different political affiliations; however, still a large majority (70%) rated these relationships positively.

The most common sources of strain were fiscal, federal, and political. When asked to rate the extent to which a list of issues was "sources of strain, tension, or conflict in their district", more than half of SBMs cited fiscal concerns, including declining enrollment (54% reported this to a moderate or great extent) and uncertainty about federal funding and oversight (66%) (Figure 11). About half also cited other recent federal administration policy changes in immigration enforcement (52%), the influence of other federal policies/executive orders (47%), and policies banning DEI programs (40%). Also noteworthy, more than one-third of SBMs cited labor union issues as a source of strain or conflict. Interestingly, other sources of conflict widely publicized by the media, particularly "culture war" issues related to transgender policies and curricular topics, were cited far less often. A minority of members identified the following as moderate or large sources of tension in their communities: transgender issues related to bathrooms/locker rooms (18%), sports participation (18%), pronouns (17%), teaching about race (21%), threats to traditional values (22%), and religious values in schools (10%).

Figure 11. Sources of Strain, Tension, or Conflict in District and/or Community (n=667)

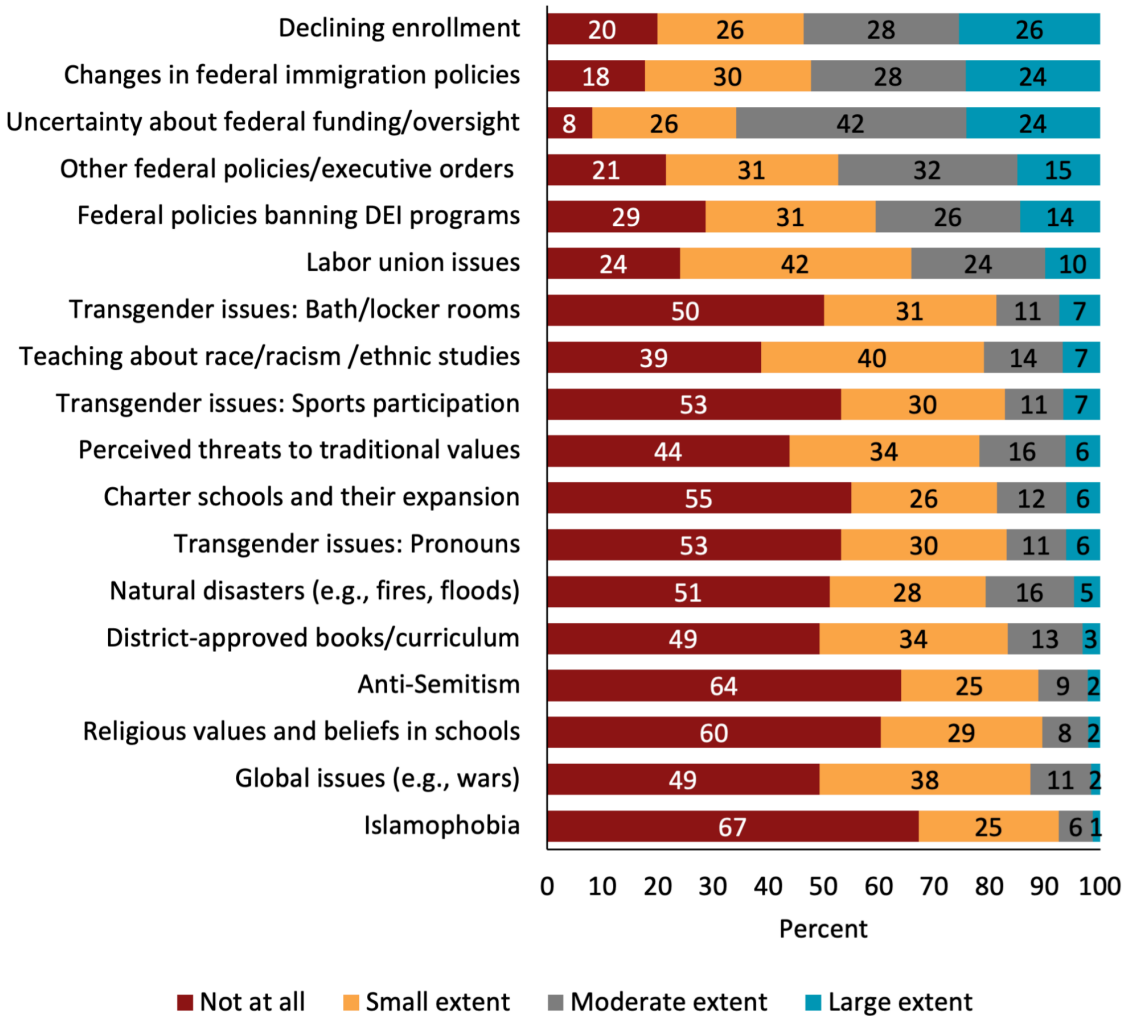
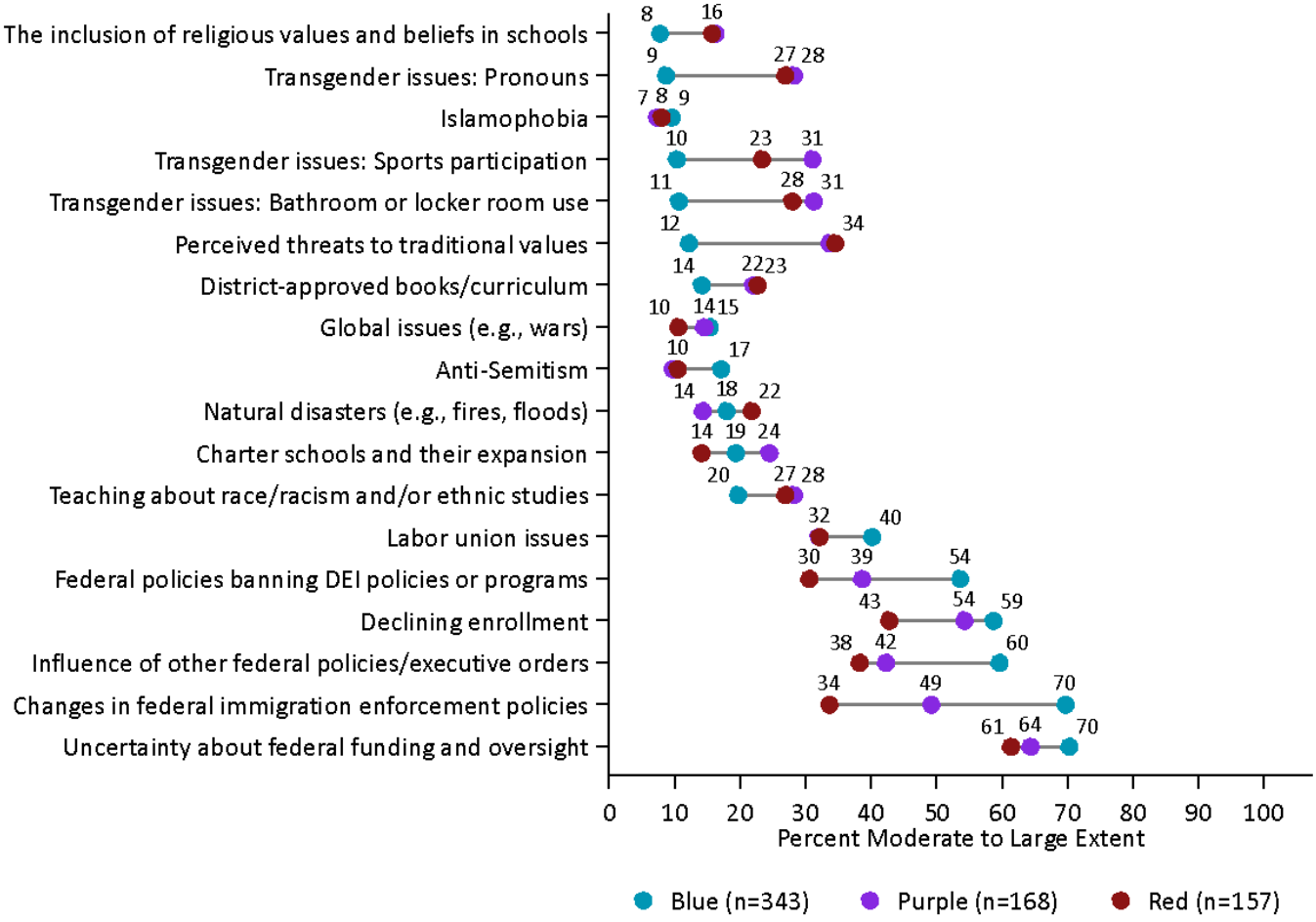
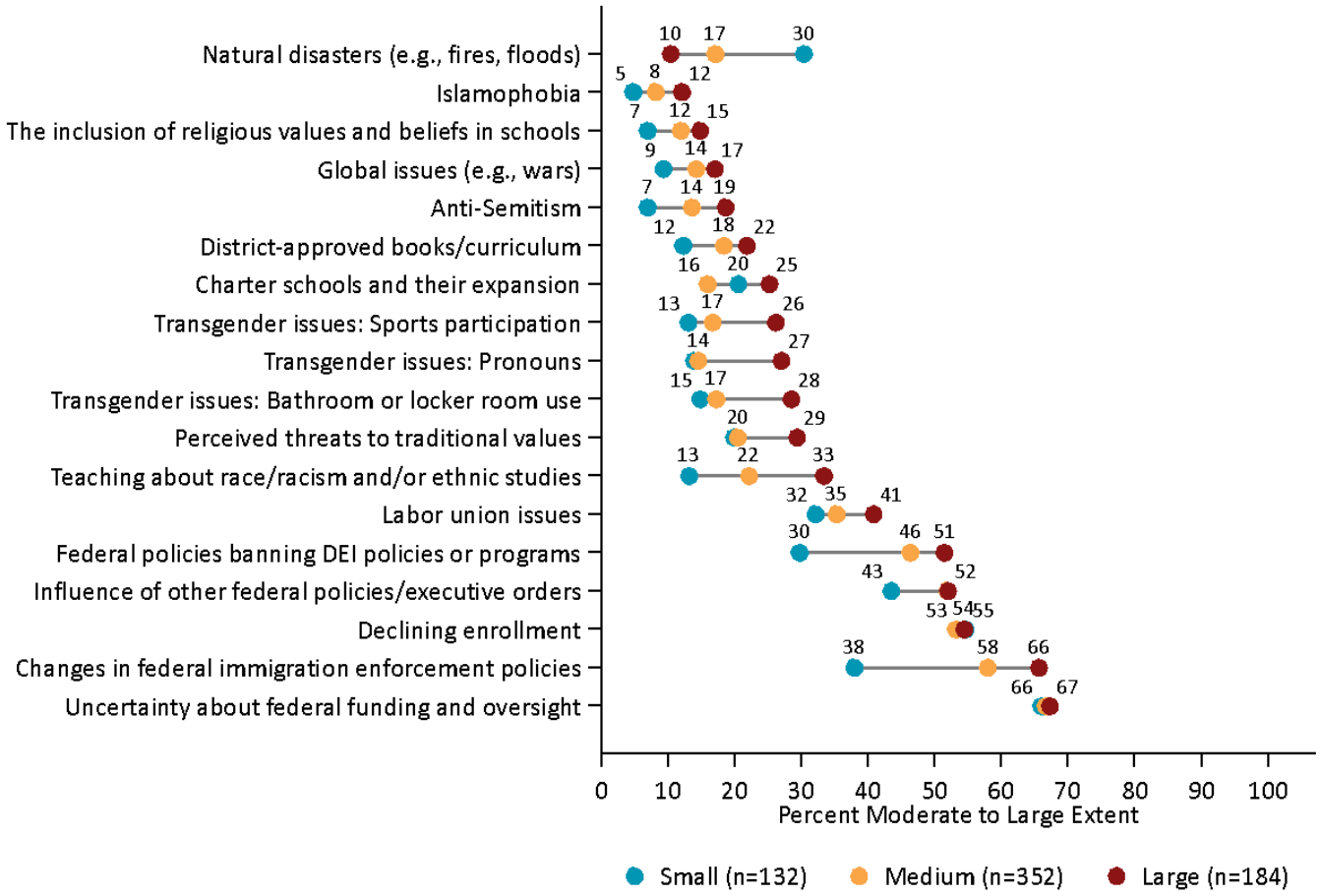


Figure 12. Sources of Strain, Tension, or Conflict, by District Partisan Lean



Though responses to some of these items varied among subgroups of SBMs (see Appendix Table A4a-c), two sets of differences stand out. First, local partisan context appeared to matter. As illustrated in Figure 12, members from "blue" districts (where a majority vote for the Democratic Party) were more likely to cite federal policy decisions as a source of tension than their counterparts in "purple" and even more so "red" districts. For example, 70% of SBMs from blue areas reported changes in federal immigration enforcement as a moderate or great source of tension, compared to 49% of SBMs in purple areas and 34% in red areas. In contrast, members in red and purple districts were more likely to cite culture war issues (e.g., transgender issues, teaching about race/racism, perceived threats to traditional values) as sources of tension than those in blue districts. This is consistent with prior work showing greater challenges with community conflict over culture war issues among school principals working in purple communities (Rogers & Kahne, 2022).

Figure 13. Sources of Strain, Tension, or Conflict, by District Size



Second, district size also appeared to matter. As illustrated in Figure 13, SBMs from large districts were more likely than their counterparts in medium and small districts to report many of the sources of strain. This is perhaps not surprising given that red districts do tend to be smaller than blue and purple districts, on average. Though, importantly, majorities of SBMs - regardless of district size - reported declining enrollment and uncertainty about federal funding as moderate to large sources of strain.

There were also differences on many items when it came to the partisan affiliation of members themselves. SBMs identifying as Democrats were more likely to cite recent federal policies (e.g., changes in immigration enforcement, policies banning DEI programs) as a source of strain, whereas Republican SBMs were more likely to cite “culture war” issues (transgender issues, teaching of race/racism and/or ethnic studies) and perceived threats to traditional values (see Appendix Table A4a-c). Also, SBMs who ran opposed in their most recent election were more likely than those who ran

unopposed to report several sources of strain, including district-approved books, inclusion of religious values, and perceived threats to traditional values (see Appendix Table A5a-b). One SBM described a difficult and intensely personal recent campaign that she believed was influenced by the more polarized, national political climate:

> Certainly the last campaign I had with the extremist candidate running against me was very, very difficult… I'm for diversity, equity and inclusion, social-emotional learning, all of the things that the extreme MAGA wing and Moms for Liberty are against. So I'm a very easy target for them…The person who ran against me made the campaign very, very personal… She was posting about me… [and] posting pictures of my children in extremist groups. I had very nasty, threatening emails coming to me from all over the country during that campaign. My family had to enlist the help of people to bolster my family's cyber security. We increased security at our home. You know, school board trustees aren't paid very much, if anything, in some districts. I don't have a security detail or a budget to do that, but I felt like my family was being threatened and at risk, and the thought of going through that again is not something that I want to repeat.

On a separate note worth highlighting, SBMs from small and rural districts were more likely to report natural disasters as a source of strain (see Figure 13 and Appendix Table A4).

Deep Dive: Strains from Federal Policy Changes

To unpack reported concerns about federal policy changes we purposefully interviewed 11 survey respondents who expressed either that "uncertainty about federal funding" or "immigration enforcement" was impacting their district to a large extent. We also drew from the other 20 "deep dive" interviews, in which these topics often arose unsolicited. Across the sample of interviewees, there was strong agreement that changes in the federal policy landscape were deeply impacting the day-to-day work of boards.

SBMs described increasing complexity in carrying out their responsibilities. *SBMs emphasized that the early days of 2025 involved federal officials expressing their intention to shrink the federal government's role in education, remove DEI programs from public schools and reduce or reallocate previously-awarded funding. Despite court challenges, participants noted that the rapidly changing contexts were causing strains within their districts as they attempted to*

plan for the future. Due to the sheer number of potential federal-level changes, one board member from a midsize, suburban district explained that "It's hard to have a contingency plan when you have no idea what's gonna happen."

Despite the uncertainty, SBMs described working to proactively respond to fears about shifts in federal policies. Several members expressed a commitment to DEI programs, but also recognized potential dangers of openly continuing this work in the current political climate. One member explained that while their local community was in support of DEI, their district leaders chose to make some changes, "...because we're afraid of the Trump administration trying to shut us down or take money away." Members described feeling tension between wanting to be responsive to community concerns while mindful of their fiscal and legal responsibilities to the district and state. Several expressed a desire not to make their districts "a target" by the federal government, while still doing what they felt they needed to do to support students and families. For some, this involved communicating directly with concerned community members and explaining that their actions represented an intentional strategy to insulate the district from harm, rather than a retreat from shared community values. As one board member stated, "I mean, we can make a lot of noise…but the reality is, if we do and we get punished by withholding funds, how is that helping our students?"

Relatedly, one board member noted that shifts in federal policies had brought about changes in the kinds of public comment that they received. They described a transition from a focus on local issues to increased calls for board members to be more politically active in support of restoring federal funding and civil rights protections:

> *We got a lot of people coming saying, "You need to be writing letters. You need to be calling Congress." So most of what we're hearing now in terms of people coming to our meetings is wanting us to step up and do what we can to get them to restore staffing in the Department of Education and things like that.*

Other members described some hesitancy in this kind of advocacy, with one explaining "...there's limited things we can do as a school district."

Concerns about increased federal immigration enforcement have been a flashpoint in some members' day-to-day responsibilities, often leading to new or enhanced district policies and procedures. *When asked about their concerns with the impacts of federal immigration policies, many members in this interview sample noted that increased enforcement has impacted community engagement. One member representing a rural district shared:*

> *We had our Fall Festival a couple weeks ago. It is the biggest thing in town at one of our elementary schools. We probably got two-thirds participation this year. A third of the people stayed home because they were afraid that they would get arrested and sent back to wherever they came from.*

In addition to decreased community involvement, interviewees expressed concerns about the impacts of immigration issues on student attendance and community well-being. SBMs described instances of federal agents operating close to school sites with varying impacts on students and community members. One member from a large, suburban district recalled:

> *About three weeks ago, we had ICE agents take a group of landscapers off the street and put them in unmarked cars. A parent was taking their child to school, and when the child saw it, they became very upset. They didn't want to go to school and wanted the parent to go back to help. The parent wanted to go back to help, but didn't know what to do. She told her child, "we have got to get you to school." But the child called probably 20 times throughout the day, wondering what happened. "What happened to the people? What's going to happen with our friends who are brown, and why didn't they show their face?"*

A SBM from a large urban district shared, "it's just been f@$-ing brutal. We had families self-deport, and aunts and uncles like, "Hey sweetie, mommy and daddy are leaving the country, and hopefully we'll see you in a few years. Be good."*

In response, board members described receiving ongoing calls from community members to take proactive stances against the current federal approach to immigration enforcement. The same member described:

> *There's anxiety that bad things are happening to our children, and we have a duty of care to serve them and protect them…And that it's difficult to know how to discharge our duties effectively and lawfully with an opponent that, in some cases, is the federal government, which is trying to hurt these children. And our duty is to protect the children and to be compliant with federal law. … [I]t is a difficult thing to do.*

While some chose to make public statements and draft board resolutions, other SBMs expressed hesitation due to concerns about overstepping their role and fear of retaliation. For example, one long-serving member from the Central Coast recalled, "At the first Trump election, I actually wrote a resolution declaring our schools were safe spots, all that kind of stuff. And we didn't do it this time because we didn't want to draw attention to ourselves." Another suburban SBM explained, "We don't control the Department of Homeland Security. We're not the immigration police. So we got to really stick within our boundaries." Other members agreed, with one sharing, "We can't fight ICE. We can't fight the federal government. We're a school board. All we can do is just protect the children and the families the best we can with good policies."

For most interviewees, policy responses have involved strengthening existing safety and security policies to ensure students and families are not deprived of due process while on school grounds. One Central Coast SBM framed concerns as less about resisting federal immigration efforts and more about maintaining school security. She highlighted their schools are already fenced in and have one entry point where visitors have to show identification in the front office. Therefore, their work has focused on working with the superintendent to tighten protocols that help allay concerns from families like "What happens if a parent gets picked up and, you know, the child is at school? What is our safety plan for the child?"

In the absence of new formal policies, some members described an approach of proactively informing families of their existing rights and protections under the law. For example, one SBM from Southern California shared that once they learned of potential immigration raids, "We reached out very, very, very quickly to reassure [families] that we knew what the law was. We were following the state attorney general's guidance when parents expressed concern." She went on to explain that even with these additional efforts, "We still get questions. We send out things, but I would say our staff has remained on kind of high alert."

SBMs indicated that uncertainty around federal funding was impacting their strategic planning. *Interviewees expressed significant concerns about the uncertainty around federal funding and related federal policy shifts. For example, some districts had dual language immersion programs that often led to the hiring of non-U.S. citizens to teach in hard-to-fill*

positions. One member from a small, rural district described President Trump's proposal to charge a $100,000 fee for H-1B visas as "...killer for us," explaining, "We can't afford that." Another member raised the fiscal impact of decreased attendance due to increased immigration enforcement, explaining, "If you don't get butts in the seat, we don't get dollars. That's simple, right?... So given that, yes, we are concerned about the impacts."

SBMs' perspectives on the potential impact of federal funding cuts were often mixed and nuanced, specifically due to variation in district size and availability of other resources. Some interviewees acknowledged that federal funding was already limited in some ways and explained that while there would be some financial impacts if proposed funding cuts materialized, their districts would remain in good standing:

> *We have a very small percentage that comes from the federal government. And I want to say that we might be looking at a half million dollars, and that would be all. Because we budget very conservatively, we will be able to plug that hole in whatever way.*

Similarly, a member from a small district explained that "It'll definitely hurt to lose that money, but it doesn't jeopardize the district's existence...But those dollars count."

In contrast, other members characterized potential cuts as "devastating", with one from a large suburban district explaining that her district was exploring a variety of contingency plans ranging from school mergers and consolidations to early retirement programs and strengthening existing community partnerships. Even with those efforts, she noted, "Quite frankly, if the Title One funds get cut, all our school districts are going to be in a world of hurt…All the extras that we offer will…I don't know how we can possibly sustain them." Another member from a small suburban district shared that her district has chosen to strategically pre-purchase items needed for programs and seek reimbursement while the grants are still active. She cautioned that this approach "doesn't cover salaries of people that we would have hired in the coming years, but we're trying to be creative about ways to spend that money to get reimbursed while we still can."

A key concern for other members, when considering possible reductions in federal funding, was the rising cost of special education and the need to continue providing legally mandated services. These concerns were raised across a range of district types and locations, with one

Southern California member characterizing the issue as a "crisis". Other members noted that special education costs were rising drastically from year to year, with significant impacts for smaller districts:

> *In a small district, we just spent $2 million more last year on special education than the year before. Okay, and in our budget, and that's huge, and it was two million more the year before. So it's gone up in two years, $4 million just for special education with it. And so it's, it's a big thing.*

Many indicated that special education had not been adequately funded by the federal government since the inception of the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA). However, they argued that the historical lack of funding was particularly challenging in this current era of fiscal uncertainty. As one rural, Northern California board member explained, "We're one student away that has to be housed in a different public school system or non public school from bankruptcy. It's crazy how vulnerable we are to running out of money because of the way special ed is run."

Among all sources of strain, fiscal and labor issues were most likely reported to impede board progress. In the survey, SBMs were presented the same list of issues as the prior question regarding sources of tension and were then asked, "In the past year, which of the following, if any, impeded efforts to make progress on your school board's goals?" They were allowed to select up to three.[2] About half of those who selected a response reported fiscally related strains - declining enrollment (51-53% depending on calculations) and uncertainty about federal funding/oversight (44-45%) - as impeding their goals, while just under one-third (30-31%) cited labor union issues and a quarter (25%) noted changes in immigration enforcement. In follow-up interviews, some members reported that

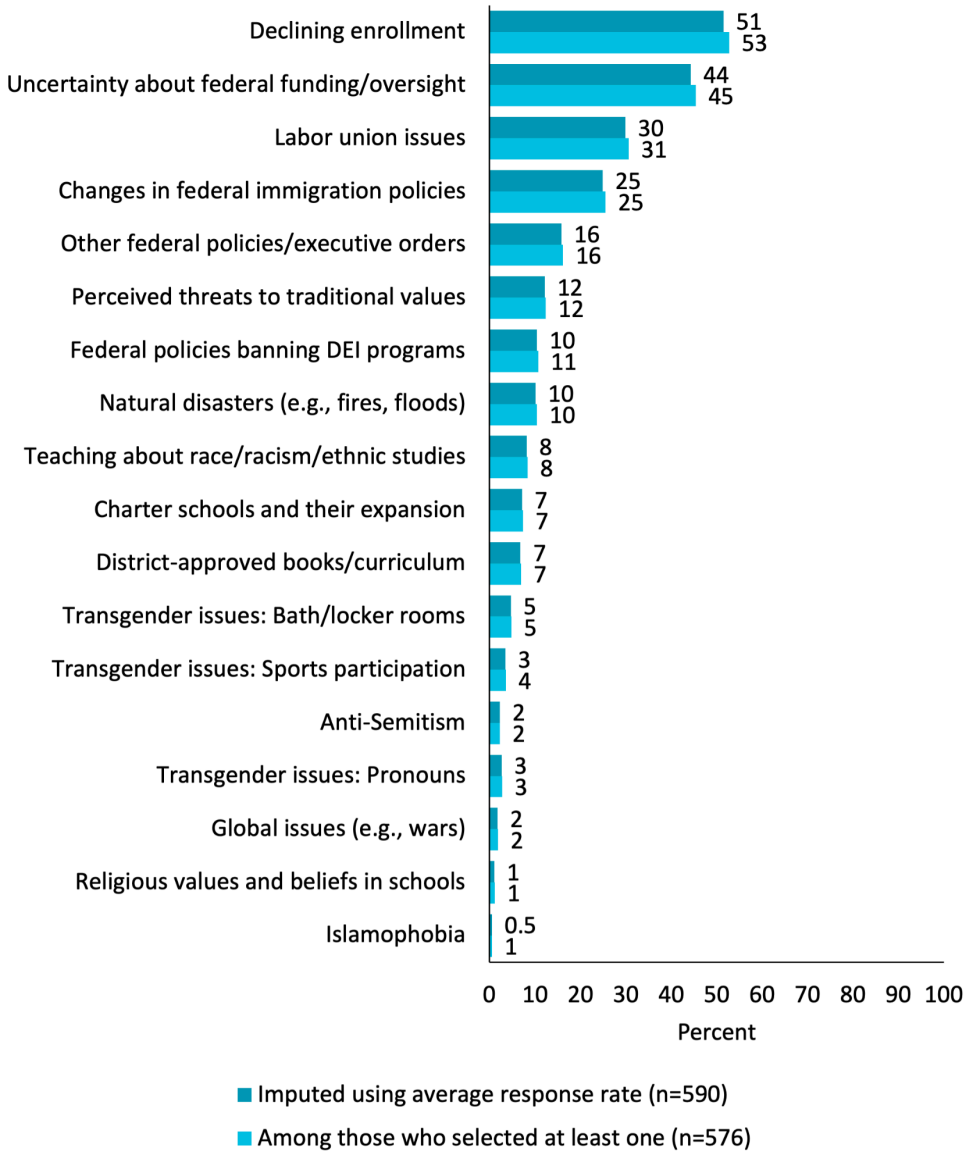
[2] Unfortunately, the construction of this question made it difficult to calculate percentages with certainty given we could not tell apart respondents who engaged with the question but simply selected zero factors that impeded board progress from respondents who simply skipped the question entirely. Therefore, we present two different versions of results. The first imputes the denominator for the percentages using the average response rate across all questions on the survey. The second uses as the denominator the number of respondents who selected at least one factor that impeded board goals (and were therefore guaranteed to have engaged with the question). We show both versions to illustrate the likely possible range of percentages.

labor management issues took time and attention away from other pressing matters. For example, one SBM shared:

> I felt very fatigued getting bogged down in two years' worth of negotiations that we could have spent collaborating [and] advocating at the state level for more funds that would allow the district to give our teachers and our students what they deserve.

Returning to the survey, once again, far fewer reported national culture war issues as impeding board progress, ranging from 12% for perceived threats to traditional values to 3% for pronoun issues (see Figure 14).

Figure 14. Factors that Impeded Efforts to Make Progress on Board's Goals in Past Year



Members felt less confident navigating challenges when framed as race-related issues.

Although members did not often emphasize culture war issues as major impediments to progress, that does not mean that they always expressed great confidence in handling issues related to identity. In one part of the survey, we embedded an experiment designed to see how confident they felt in their board's ability to handle a hypothetical local conflict. The results suggested more confidence when the conflict was framed in race neutral way than in a way that primed them to think about race. More specifically, all respondents were asked to read about a hypothetical scenario in which there was public pressure to reinstate a School Resource Officer (SRO) program in a district. Respondents were randomly assigned to see one of two versions of a prompt, one meant to raise the salience of race, and one meant not to raise race.[3] The prompt meant not to prime respondents to consider race was the following:

> *In response to student demands several years ago, the school board in District Y eliminated its School Resource Officer (SRO) program. A recent rise in gun violence at several district-sponsored events has sparked calls from parents and families to reinstate the SRO program to address concerns about safety. However, students within the district remain staunchly opposed to SROs returning to their schools, citing past negative experiences with SROs focusing mostly on dress code violations, cell phone use, and stopping students from vaping instead of making school feel safer.*

While the prompt meant to prime respondents to consider race was:

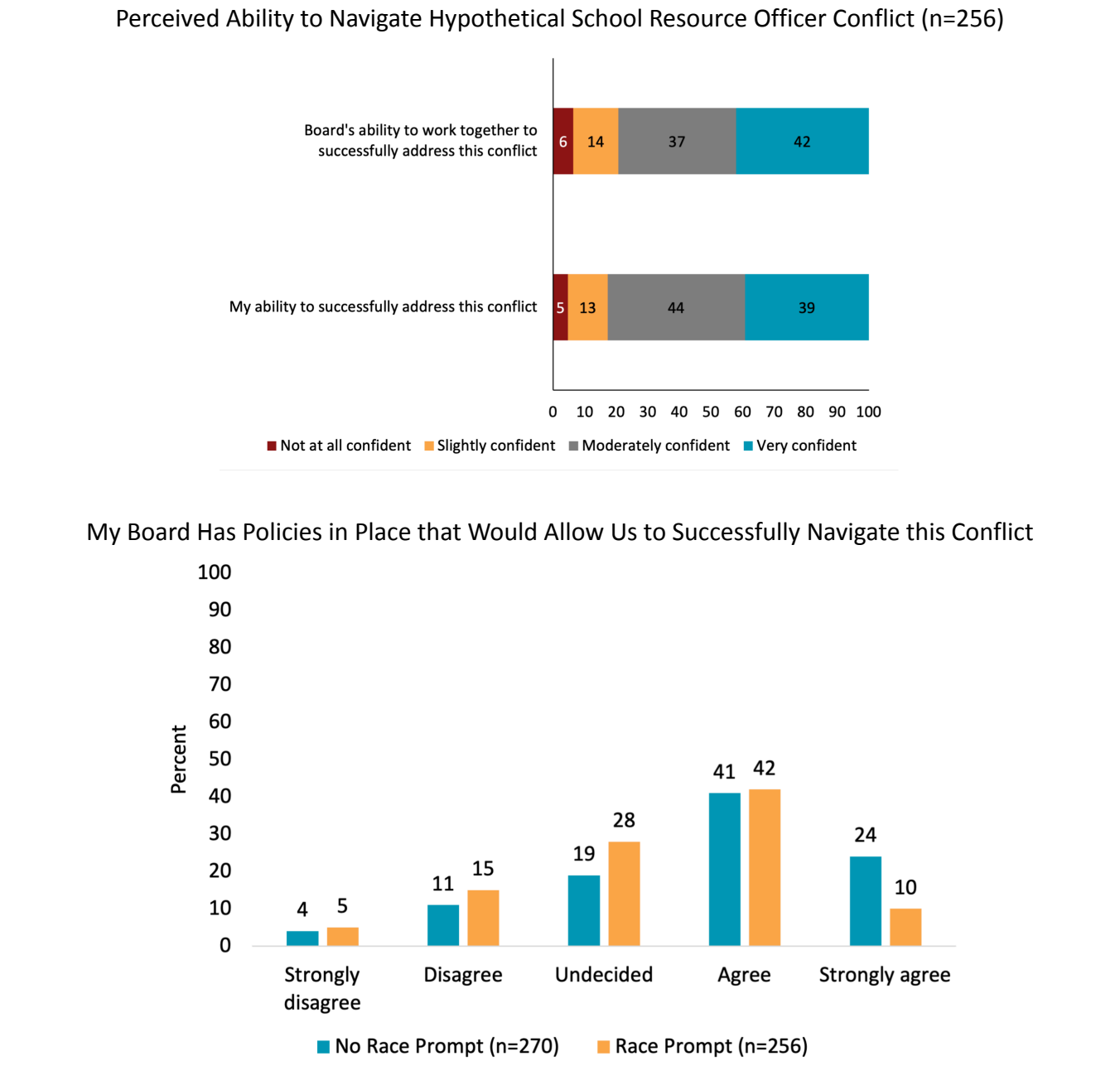
> *In response to community demands stemming from the Summer 2020 movement for racial justice, the school board in District Y eliminated its School Resource Officer (SRO) program. A recent rise in gun violence at several district-sponsored events has sparked calls from local community leaders to reinstate the SRO program to address the safety concerns of district parents and families. However, students of color within the district are staunchly opposed to SROs returning to their schools, citing past experiences with racial profiling and the use of excessive force.*

[3] The two experimental groups were generally balanced on observable characteristics, however, there were some differences based on parental status and the share of white students in the district–representing two of the 16 characteristics (12.5%) for which we tested for balance. Respondents who saw the race prompt were more likely to have ever been a parent of a child enrolled in the school system where they were serving as a board member, and were serving in districts with somewhat higher shares of white students. Therefore, when we examine differences between the two experimental groups, we do so both without and with controls for covariates, specifically, parental status of the member, and at the district level the share of white students, students qualifying for subsidized meals, district size, and whether the district was rural, suburban, or a town. These covariates represent dimensions on which there appeared to be some imbalance between the groups, as well as the dimensions for which we generated weights to improve the representativeness of our sample. We do employ the raking weights for the experimental results (although findings are not sensitive to this decision).

Both vignettes concluded with the line, “The final vote on reinstating the SRO program will occur at this week’s board meeting, where close to 50 community members have already signed up for public comment concerning this agenda item.”

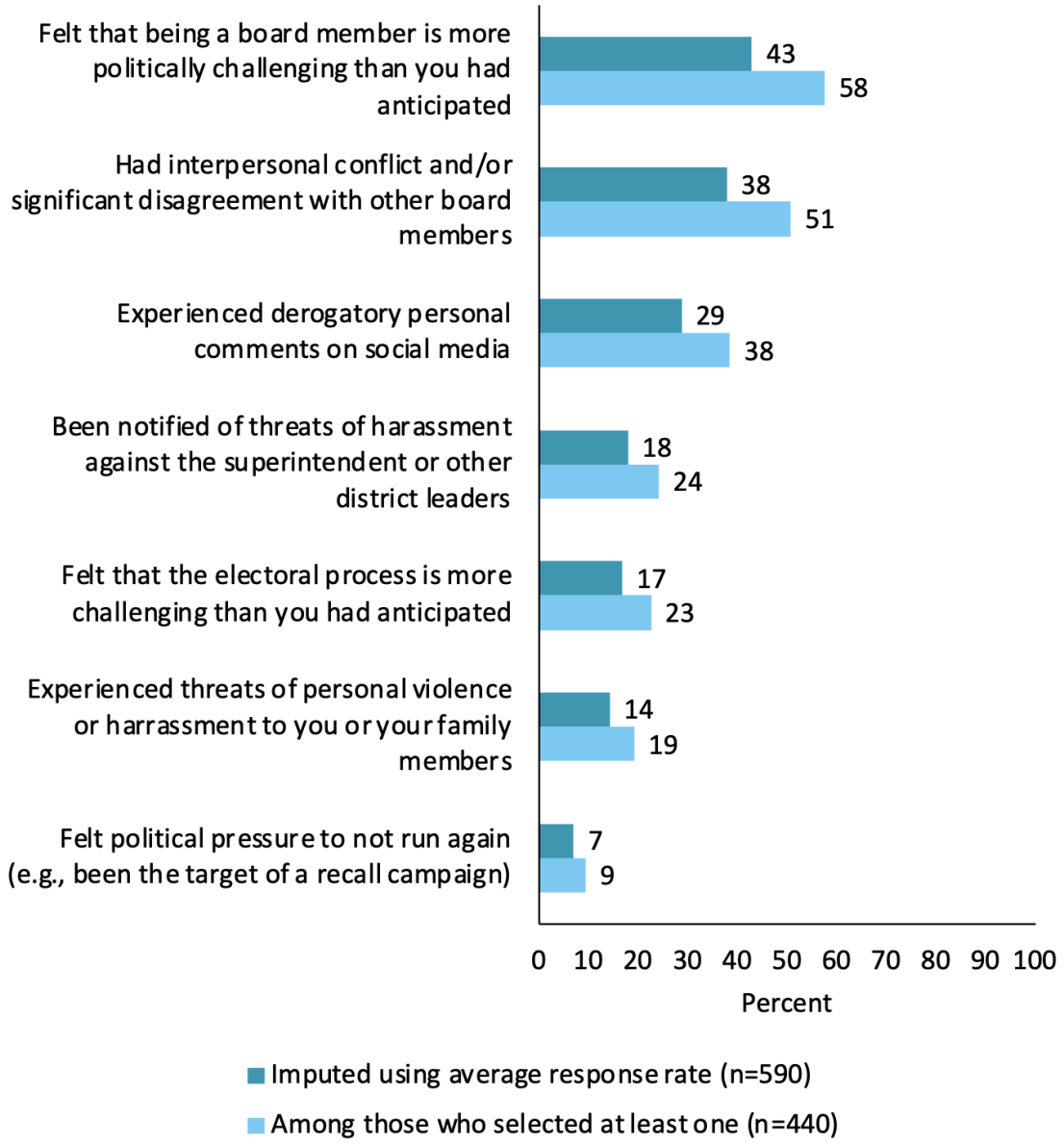
As we show in the top panel of Figure 15, among those who saw the prompt meant to raise the salience of race, 79% were confident in their board’s ability to work together to successfully navigate the conflict, although only a portion (42%) were “very confident,” while 37% were “moderately confident.” A non-trivial 20% were either not at all confident or only slightly confident. Similarly, 83% were confident in their own individual ability to successfully address the conflict, but only 39% were very confident. When all respondents were asked whether they agreed that “My school board has policies in place that would allow us to successfully navigate this conflict,” only 52% of those who saw the race prime said they agreed or strongly agreed. The rate of agreement was 13 percentage points higher (65%) among those who saw the prompt that did not prime respondents to think about race. See the bottom panel of Figure 15. Therefore, members had greater agreement that their board could successfully navigate the conflict when it was framed in race-neutral than race-forward ways.

Figure 15. Perceived Ability to Navigate Hypothetical School Resource Officer Conflict



Note: The top panel includes only the sample that saw the prompt emphasizing race.

Figure 16. Member Reports of Political Pressures and Challenges in the Past Year



Many SBMs felt the political challenges of serving. As illustrated in Figure 16, about half of SBMs reported that in the past year they had felt that being a board member was more politically challenging than they had anticipated (43-58% depending on calculations)[4] and that they had experienced interpersonal conflict or disagreement with fellow board members (38-51%). About a third had experienced derogatory personal comments on social media (29-38%), while a smaller group experienced threats of violence or harassment (14-19%).

These reports on political climate and experience varied for different subgroups. Notably, women were more likely than men to experience most of these political pressures (Figure 17). Also, SBMs in districts that operate trustee elections were more likely than those in at-large districts to experience nearly all of these political challenges (Figure 18). We observed somewhat different patterns among those who ran opposed, who were more likely than SBMs who ran unopposed to report experiencing many of these same pressures (see Appendix Table A5). Responses also varied by urbanicity and size. That is, SBMs from city, and in some cases town, districts were more likely than their counterparts in suburban and rural areas to report experiencing many of these political pressures (see Figure 19). Similarly, political pressures were more common among SBMs in large districts compared to medium and small ones (see Appendix Table A6a-c).

[4] Again, for this question we were unable to distinguish between those who did not select any of the challenges (but did engage with the set of survey questions) from those who did not engage with this set of questions at all. Therefore, we provide the percentages based on two different denominators described above in Figure 16.

Figure 17. Political Pressures and Challenges, by Gender

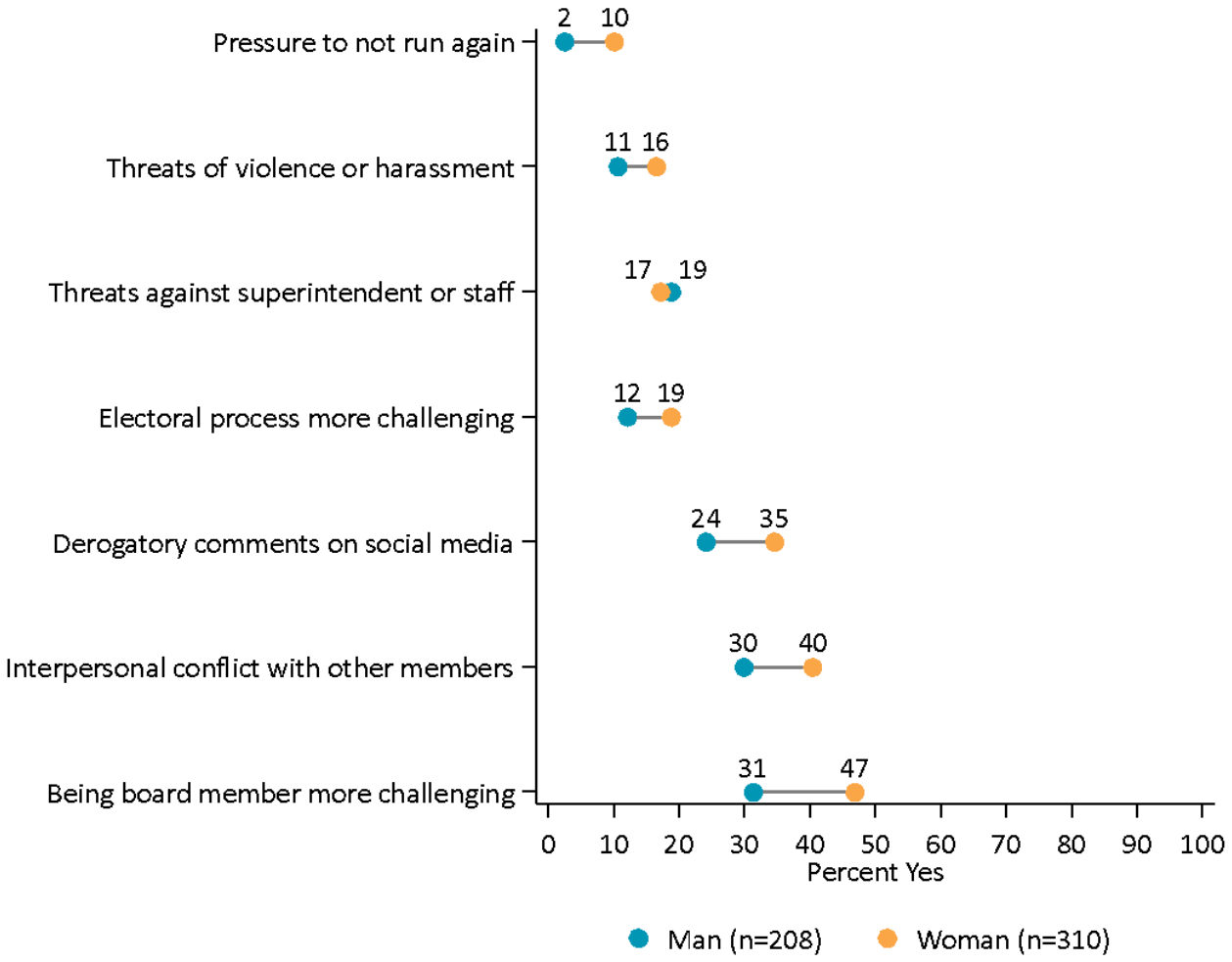


Figure 18. Political Pressures and Challenges, by Type of Electoral System

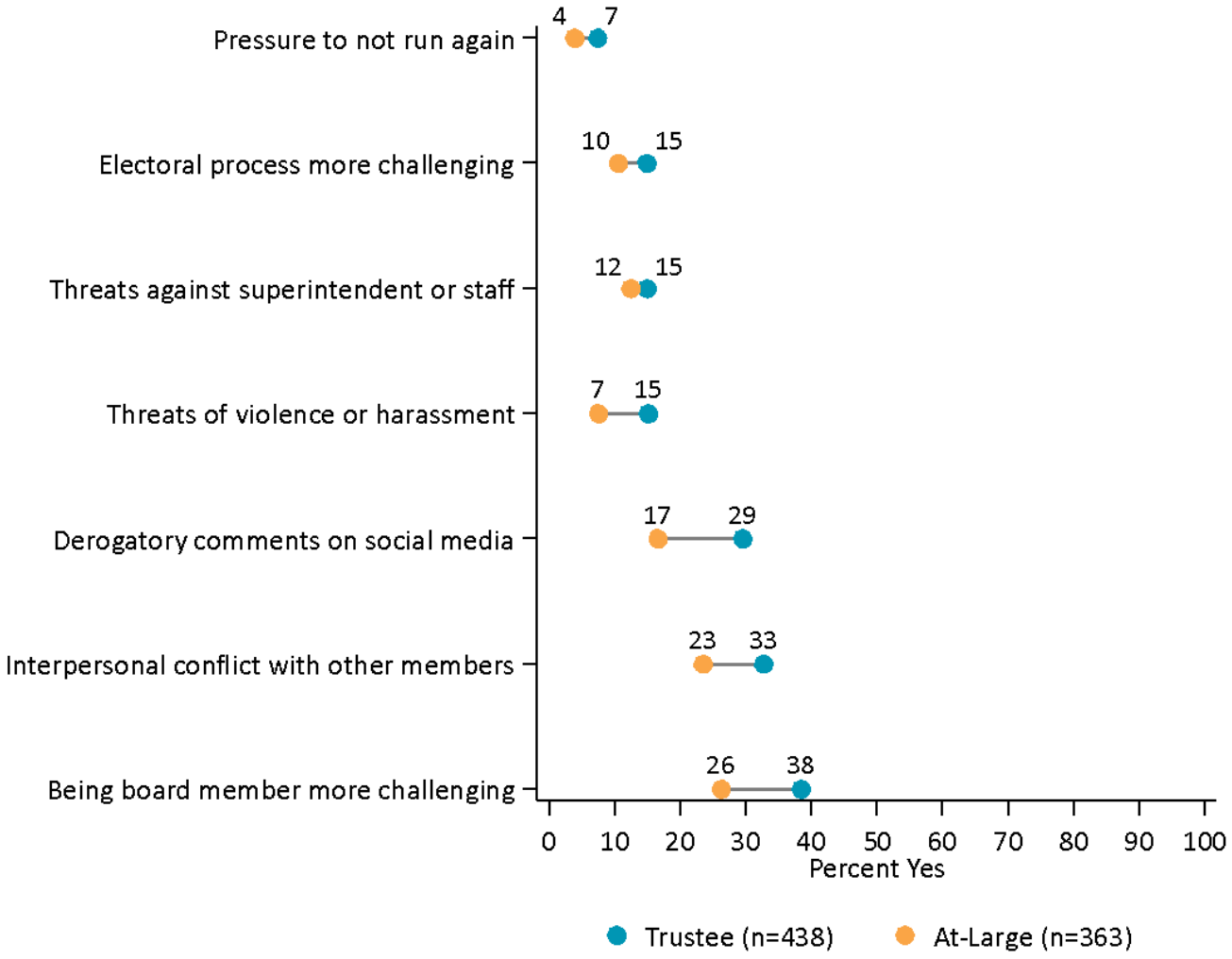
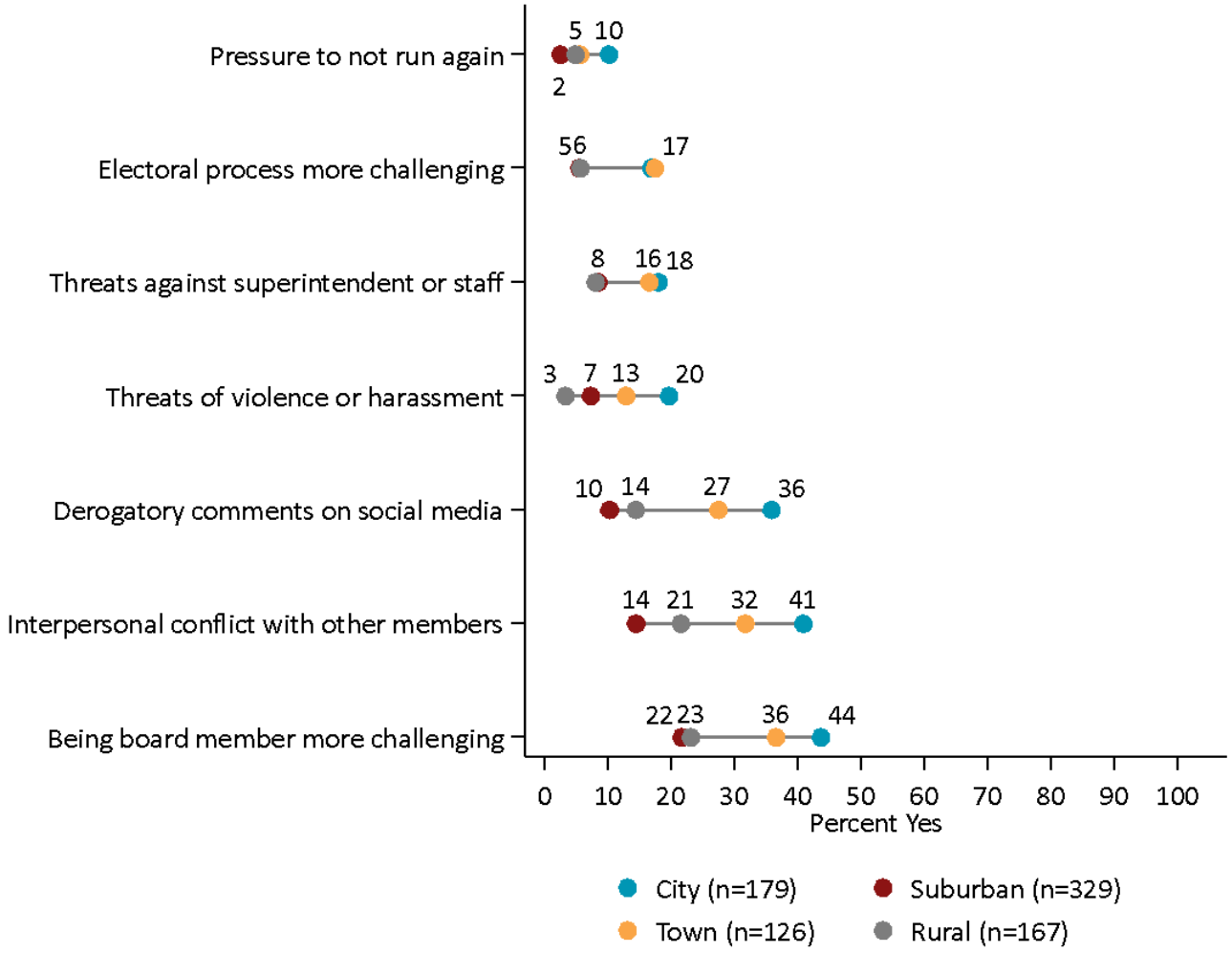


Figure 19. Political Pressures and Challenges, by Urbanicity



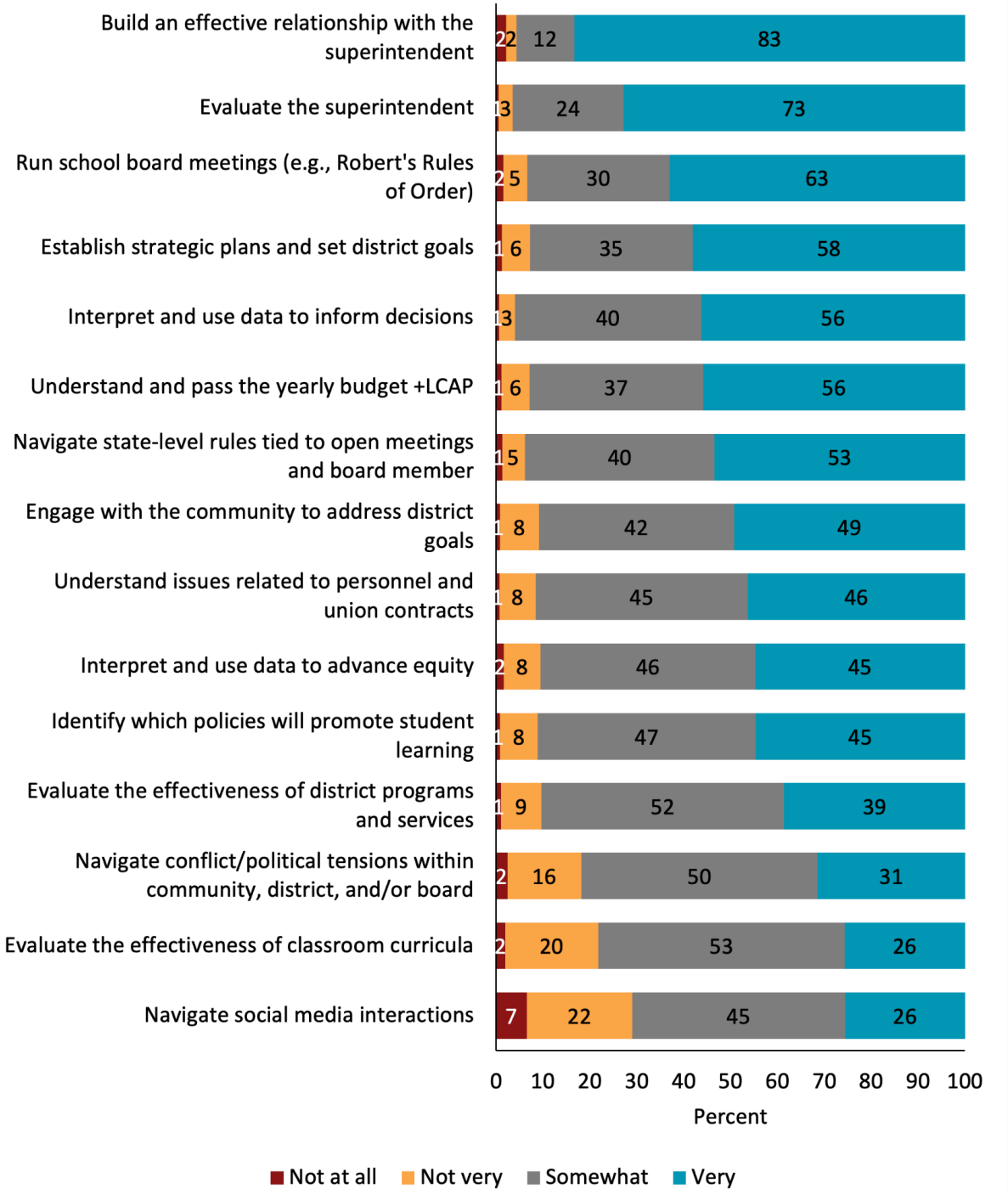
(RQ2C) What supports do school board members have and want?

Given the potential strains facing public schools and SBMs, we sought to understand the support SBMs were receiving and wanted to help them more effectively serve in these roles. We began by asking about the aspects of their roles where they felt the most and least confident. We then inquired about particular sources and topics of training, and perceptions of state guidance and support.

Overall, several needs emerged. Though confident in many areas, SBMs were less confident and wanted more support, particularly related to evaluation and data use, social media, navigating politics and legal guidance, and labor contracts. Findings indicated a strong desire for local sources of training and support differentiated to local contexts and needs, as well as an openness to participating in local network-based or mentorship opportunities. Finally, SBMs expressed mixed views on the value of state-level guidance and policies.

While confident in many aspects of their roles, members felt limited confidence in evaluating program effectiveness and using social media. When asked about aspects of their role in which they felt more or less confident, SBMs expressed high levels of confidence in their ability to build an effective relationship with and evaluate the superintendent, where 83% and 73% of SBMs reported feeling very confident, respectively (Figure 20). In contrast, members expressed more limited confidence in their ability to evaluate the effectiveness of programs or policies. Only 39% said they were very confident in evaluating district programs and services, and an even smaller share (26%) said they were very confident in evaluating classroom curricula —though the latter is not a formal responsibility of boards (by law, their role is to oversee the process for instructional material review, establish a committee to conduct the review, and based on this review verify materials meet state standards; also to ensure compliance with other state statues, and ensure opportunities for parent/community review and input). Among all areas covered by the survey, members expressed the lowest levels of confidence in their ability to navigate social media interactions, with 29% saying they were not at all or not very confident, and only 26% indicating that they felt very confident.

Figure 20. How Confident Do You Feel in Your Ability to Do the Following? (n=547)



Perhaps not surprisingly, members with 6+ years of experience expressed greater confidence in nearly all areas covered compared to those with less experience (Appendix Table A2). White board members were less confident than non-white members in engaging with the community, using data to

advance equity, navigating social media interactions, and navigating political tensions. We did not observe major differences in confidence levels by district characteristics. See Appendix Table A7a-c.

Members expressed a high level of demand for additional training in a range of areas. Members indicated a desire for training in a wide variety of topics, with a majority of respondents indicating they would like more training in every single category covered by the survey. We display these results in Figure 21. The topics with the greatest demand included: navigating legal guidance on changes in state and federal policy (80%), identifying which policies will promote student learning (79%), evaluating the effectiveness of classroom curricula (with 79% saying they want more training), evaluating district programs and services (78%), interpreting and using data to inform decisions (74%). Other topics where a majority also said they want training included: navigating conflict/political tensions within community (69%), personnel and union contracts (67%), using data to advance equity (68%), navigating social media interactions (61%), engaging with the community (70%), and establishing strategic plans and setting district goals (71%).

In general, members from districts serving more economically disadvantaged student populations and districts with below-average test-based achievement were somewhat more likely to want training and in more areas than those in more economically advantaged and above-average performing districts (see Appendix Table A8a-c). This was true, although a somewhat greater share of SBMs from districts with a majority of students qualifying for subsidized meals reported having received training on many topics than those from more advantaged communities (see Figure 22). Members from these more economically disadvantaged districts were also more likely to say that training had been useful on almost all topics covered (see Figure 23).

Figure 21. Have You Received Training on the Following and Would You Want More? (n=545)

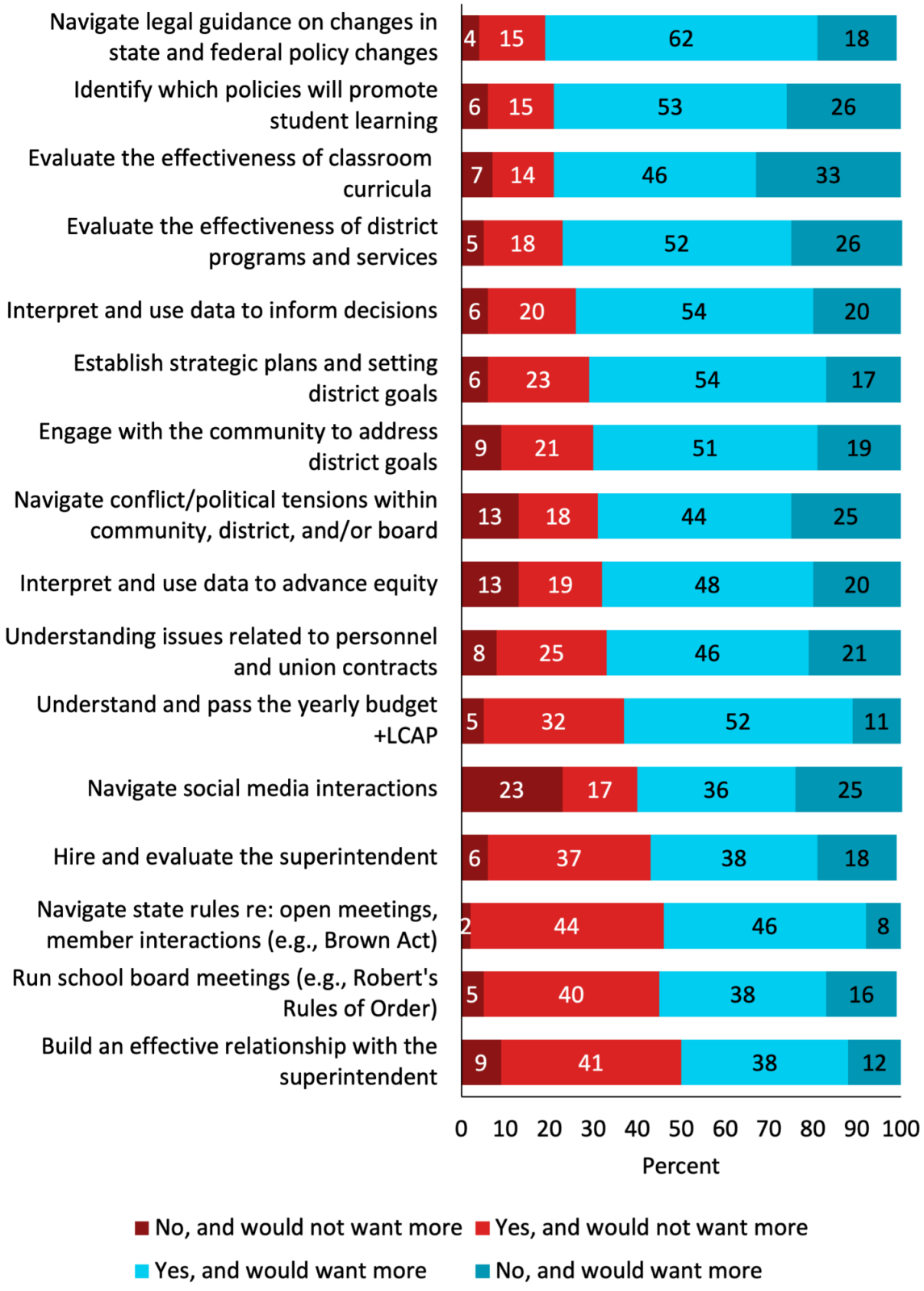


Figure 22. School Board Members Who Received Training on the Following Topics, by District Socioeconomic Makeup

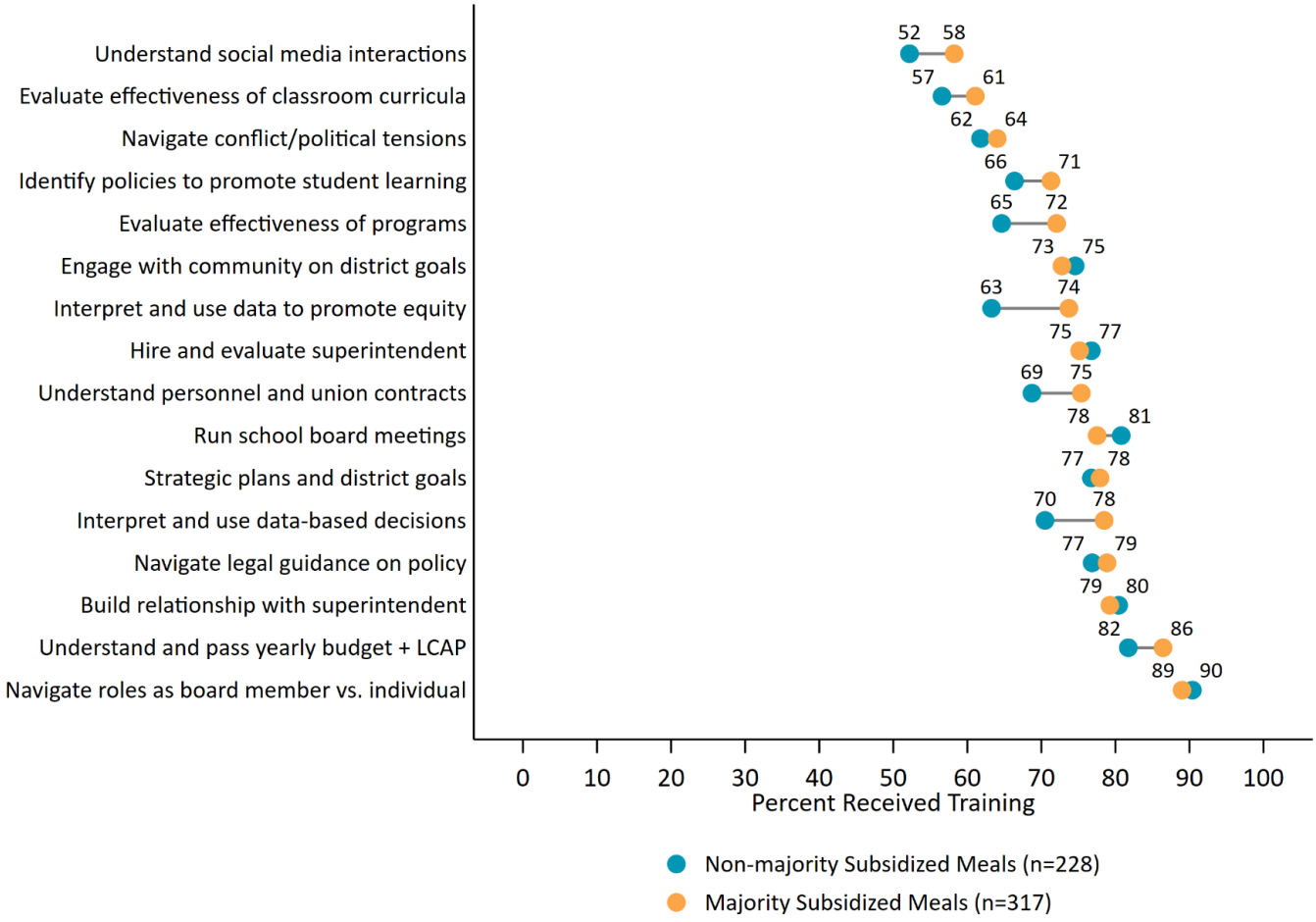
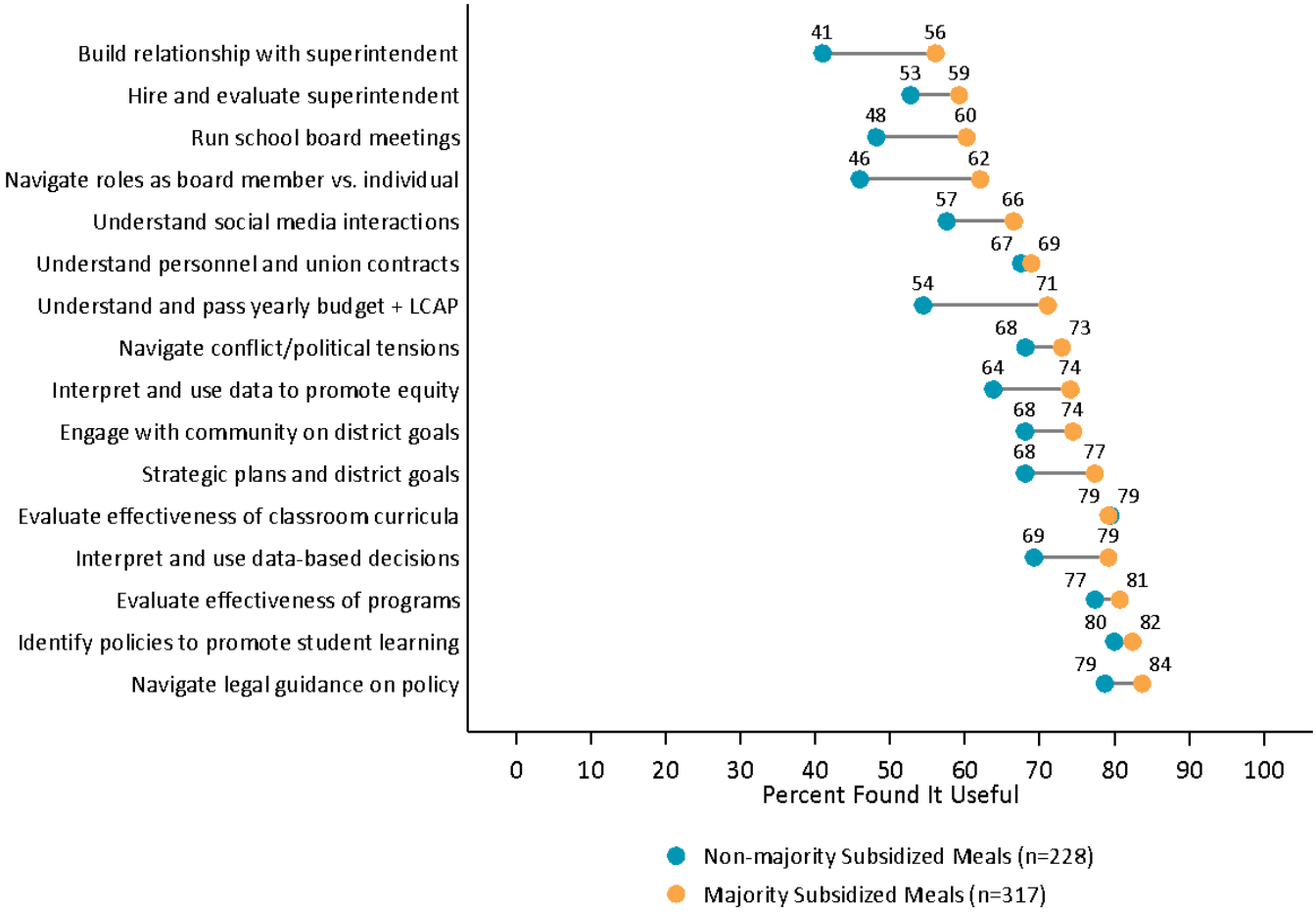


Figure 23. School Board Members Who Found Training Useful on the Following Topics, by District Socioeconomic Makeup

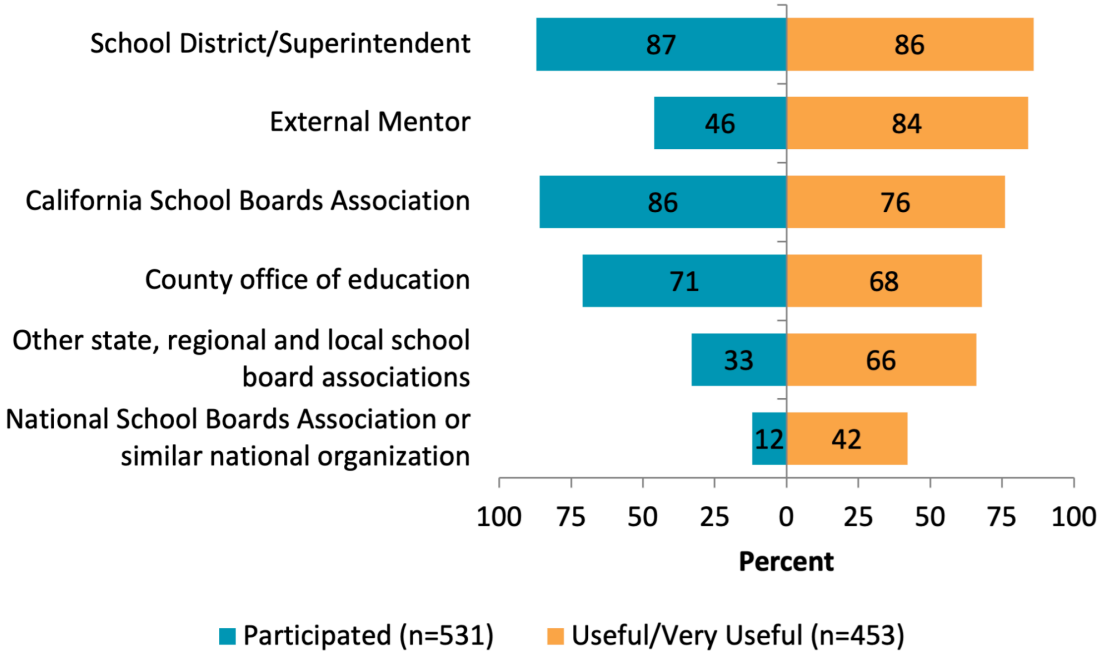


Members in suburban districts were somewhat more likely to want training in interpreting and using data to advance equity and in navigating social media interactions than SBMs in non-suburban districts. Echoing our findings on confidence in the role, less experienced board members wanted more training in a larger number of topics compared to more experienced members. Women, non-white, and Democrat-identifying members were more likely to want more training than men, white, and republican board members on several topics. Members who ran opposed in their last election generally were more likely to want more training in some topics than those who ran unopposed (see Appendix Table A5a-b).

Members saw more value in state and local sources of training and support than in national groups or associations. The most common sources of training and support board members reported receiving were the school district/ superintendent (87%) and the California School Boards Association

(86%), as shown in the left-hand side of Figure 24. Also common was the County Office of Education (71%). Smaller shares reported having received training from an external mentor (46%), other state, regional, or local school board associations (33%), or a national organization such as the National School Boards Association (12%). Respondents were most likely to rate the school district/superintendent and external mentors as useful sources of training and support, followed by the California School Boards Association, the County Office of Education, other state, regional, or local associations, and finally the National School Board Association. That said, for almost all sources of training, a majority of respondents indicated the support was useful or very useful. See the right-hand side of Figure 24 for details.

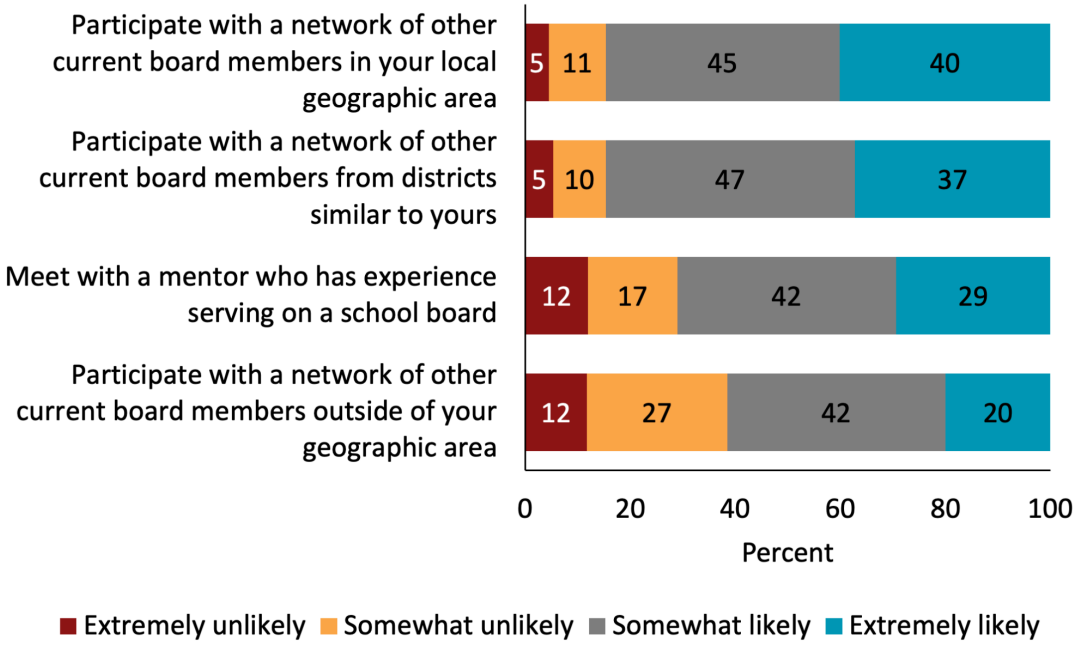
Figure 24. Participation and Perceived Usefulness by Source of Training



We also asked respondents about the likelihood they would participate if network-based or mentorship opportunities were made available to them and show a summary of responses in Figure 25. Large majorities said they would be either somewhat or extremely likely to participate in all of these opportunities. However, the share saying they would be extremely likely to participate was never a majority, ranging from 20% to 40%. The most popular opportunities were networks of board members in the members' own local geographic area, while the second was a network of members from districts

similar to your own. Respondents were somewhat less likely to express enthusiasm for meeting with an experienced SBM mentor or participating in a network of members outside of their own geographic area. In these cases, only 29% and 20% said they would be very likely to participate, respectively.

Figure 25. Likelihood of Participating if the Following Were Made Available (n=546)



Though most members supported local flexibility they were mixed on whether state policies constrained their responsiveness. On the survey, board members overwhelmingly agreed (83%) that decisions are best made locally with limited state-level "directives or mandates." Similarly, a majority disagreed that more state-level guidance would be helpful to accomplish their work (68%). However, still 31% agreed it would be helpful, as illustrated in Figure 26. The sample was also fairly split on the question of whether state-level policies constrain the board's ability to be responsive to the community, with 56% agreeing and 44% disagreeing. Discussions in interviews about the Brown Act reflected this split. Most SBMs recognized the importance of this state policy and the need to ensure transparency and prevent "back room dealings." Some described it as necessary and felt it was important to understanding its details and "be careful." Yet others felt the Act created a lot of

unproductive fear of being called out for violating its terms and constrained their work. One noted the Act's "many rules" prevented their board from having "open conversation." Another SBM explained,

> The Brown Act [was] passed ... to avoid shady back room meetings and wheeling and dealing ... that would be inappropriate. But I think the unintended side effect of this is limiting, effectively, the brain power of the board, because we don't have a mechanism of action for going and sharing data with each other, for having meaningful discussions with each other outside these agendized meetings. And I actually think that's wrong. ... this is not about shady backroom deals, but ... to enable ongoing dialogue beyond the walls of the formal meeting around what matters, what's working, what's not working, what research shows that we should be focused on, like that would be great. ... I think that the Brown Act is impeding meaningful dialogue.

We observed differences on perceptions of the state role based on the partisanship of the member in expected directions, with Democrats more favorable to more centralized forms of decision-making and guidance. We display differences in Figure 27.

Figure 26. Member Views on State-Level Mandates, Policies, and Guidance (n=592)

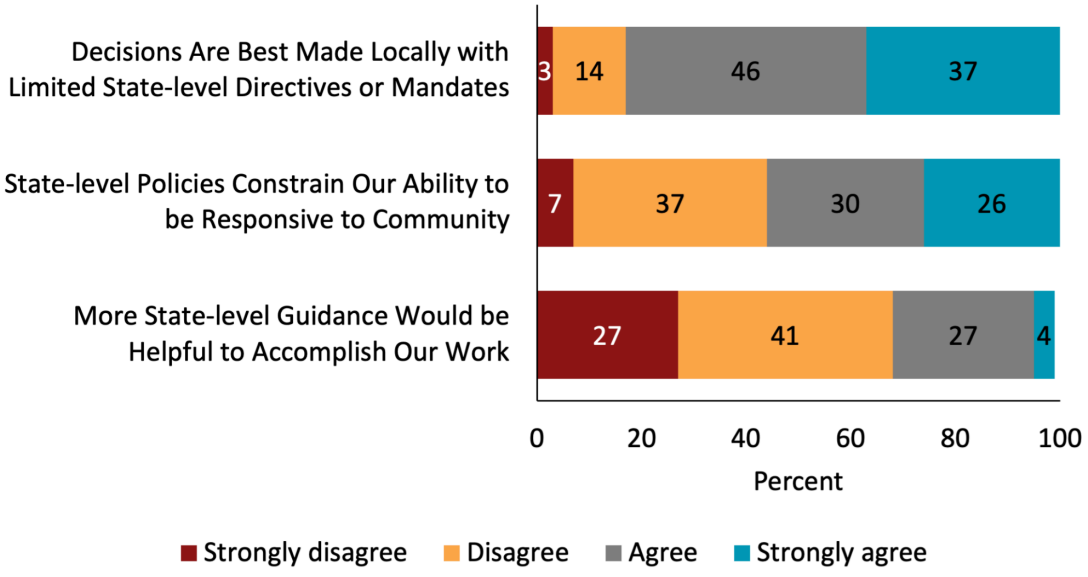
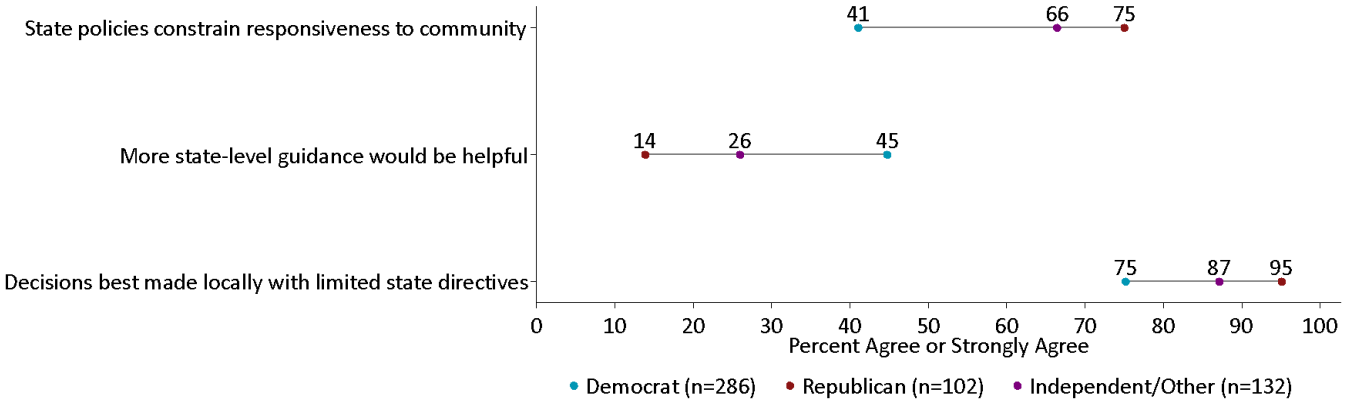


Figure 27. Member Views on State-Level Mandates, Policies, and Guidance, by Member Partisanship



Deep Dive: State-Local Relations

To unpack the seemingly mixed views about the role of the state, we purposefully interviewed 10 survey respondents who reported either a desire for more state-level guidance to achieve board goals or who believed that state-level policies constrained their ability to respond to community needs. Once again, we also drew from the other 21 "deep dive" interviews, in which these topics often arose unsolicited. Though not representative of the full survey sample, the views of these members nonetheless provide a deeper understanding for a key subset of SBMs. Our interview sample broadly supported local control in principle, yet consistently described state policy as constraining in practice, particularly through undifferentiated mandates, insufficient guidance, and funding that fails to match stated expectations. Participants often felt that one-size-fits-all state policymaking was misaligned with local priorities and needs, and further complicated by rigid state funding cycles. SBMs wanted more flexible, locally-driven forms of support to meet both community needs and state requirements.

Board members were largely opposed to "one-size-fits-all" policymaking they perceived as misaligned with local priorities and needs. Across political affiliation and district type, SBMs in the interview sample generally described the state's approach to K–12 policymaking as overly uniform, sometimes creating misalignment between mandates and local needs. Respondents

emphasized that state policy is often designed as if districts are interchangeable, despite substantial variation across California's districts in geography, size, fiscal structure, infrastructure, and community context. As a result, members described frequent implementation challenges, and, in some cases, problematic unintended consequences.

Importantly, members framed these concerns not as ideological opposition to state involvement per se, but as critiques of policy design. SBMs cited lack of differentiation, insufficient consideration of local conditions, unclear or incomplete guidance, and mandates issued without adequate funding as central sources of constraint. As one rural Republican member explained, "They're making decisions on a state level, and one size doesn't fit all… some of the things that they go ahead and make legislation on that is a problem in LA, is not a problem in [rural Northern California district]. We don't need that legislation." In response, several members described quietly adapting state policy to make it workable locally. As the same member observed, "Some of the legislation… we change before we put it in our policy a bit, still to keep it in the law, but to make it so it's workable."

Discussions of transitional kindergarten (TK) and universal preschool were particularly salient in further illustrating this pattern. Multiple respondents described TK as a well-intentioned state policy that lacked sufficient differentiation and support for local contexts. A Democratic member from a small district explained how TK implementation created confusion about community demand and unintended consequences for local childcare providers:

> *It's sometimes difficult to gauge what the community at large wants when you have 60 parents of four-year-olds banging on your door and nobody else… you think, like, 'Oh, everybody wants this,' and then you go out, and you talk to other people, and you're like, 'people don't even know what the program is.'*

Although the district implemented TK as required, the member reflected that "it bankrupted some of our local preschools. That was not a good feeling." Board members also highlighted geographic- and infrastructure-blind mandates as other domains where one-size-fits-all policymaking created challenges. Electric school bus requirements were cited by rural districts as an example of misalignment with local conditions. One member from a remote coastal

community explained, "Electric buses don't work for us… our students, if they go on field trips, it's an easy two to three hour trip… we don't have [the] infrastructure to charge up an electric bus while they're gone on the road."

In contrast, a smaller number of SBMs identified cases where state mandates helped overcome local political barriers, most notably school start time legislation. One member described how state intervention enabled changes that boards had been unable to achieve independently due to resistance from local interest-holders: "One of our board members… was really trying to push our school district to negotiate with our unions… and couldn't move anywhere with our unions. They were not doing it." These accounts underscore that members did not reject state involvement outright, but instead viewed its value as context-dependent.

State funding cycles and unfunded mandates were sources of tension. *SBMs' perspectives on local discretion were shaped in large part by their experiences with state funding, which many interviewees described as increasingly restrictive and frequently insufficient "[time] cycle[s] that makes it so that even if [they] had the best decision makers, [they] wouldn't be able to make the right decisions" to support mandated initiatives. Interviewees emphasized that state influence is felt most acutely through the ways funding is conditioned, limited, or disconnected from local capacity. Respondents further emphasized that ambiguous state guidance, particularly for basic aid districts or more urban districts, compounded implementation challenges. As one member noted,*

> *When they come up with these formulas to fund, it's not like money just comes out of thin air… they take money from other areas in order to fund what their pet project is. I'm not arguing whether it's good or bad. It's just that some of these programs are not completely thought out, funded, and executed properly.*

Members described a pattern in which new initiatives are introduced with restrictive uses, expanded reporting requirements, or incomplete fiscal support, leaving districts to absorb both the financial and administrative burden of compliance.

Several respondents noted that these dynamics have intensified over time, particularly following the implementation of the LCFF. While LCFF was widely viewed as an effective effort to increase

flexibility and local decision-making through eliminating many categorical programs, members perceived a gradual re-centralization through subsequent legislation, layering new requirements onto existing funding streams (i.e., more categorical programs). One member described this as an impactful though somewhat understandable shift, given concerns about uneven district capacity, but nonetheless constraining in practice: "They like to manage from the top down… they put in a mandate or pass a law on what needs to occur, but many times they do not put the funding behind it."

Unfunded or underfunded mandates emerged as a particularly salient concern across district types. Members described being placed in the position of reallocating funds from existing priorities or accepting fiscal risk to remain compliant. Respondents emphasized that in these cases, state policy constrained local discretion not because boards disagreed with policy goals, but because fiscal and operational implications were insufficiently addressed. One member explained that when their district transitioned from LCFF to basic aid status, charter school funding rules shifted financial responsibility in unexpected ways: "The state probably stepped in and made a decision and didn't really think about the implications… especially if you are a small district and become basic aid." Members from smaller districts similarly reported limited capacity to absorb new requirements, underscoring how funding policies often assume baseline administrative and fiscal resources that are not evenly distributed across districts.

SBMs sought more flexible, locally-driven forms of support to help them meet the needs of their communities and state-level requirements. *Despite challenges, members consistently described legal compliance as the default orientation of board governance. When state requirements aligned with community expectations or generated little controversy, boards reported minimal tension and framed implementation as routine. As one SBM explained, "If the state just said you have to do this, then we make a really easy decision, saying we have to do it." Even members who were critical of state overreach emphasized that compliance with state law was non-negotiable, given the legal, fiscal, and reputational risks associated with noncompliance: "Fundamentally, I don't believe that we should have school administrators who think they can disregard the law. Even if they think it sucks… we're going to follow the law."*

When state requirements conflicted with pressure from organized parents or advocacy groups, SBMs described navigating tensions through flexible interpretation and adaptation within legal bounds. Our data suggested some boards may manage state–local tension through pragmatic buffering rather than defiance, with some encouraging their constituents to do outreach to their representatives for state-mandated district policies with which they disagreed. One SBM explained the ways state laws sometimes help shield them from local criticism:

> *…especially around COVID, where there's just a lot of anger in the community, I could let that anger be directed at the state, because I didn't have any control over things. I agreed 100% with what we were doing, but it wasn't my call and that happens on a lot of the anti-equity stuff, like for any kind of trans-inclusive law, I'm able to say we're just following state laws and that's very comforting to be able to have them have our back.*

Finally, despite identifying meaningful gaps in governance support, SBMs did not always view the state as the appropriate source to fill them. SBMs characterized state agencies as oriented toward compliance and enforcement rather than practical capacity-building, and expressed skepticism that additional state involvement would be responsive to local governance realities. As one member noted, "I don't see how the state has ever supported me in understanding board affairs. The state doesn't provide trainings… any of those trainings are through CSBA." Instead, members emphasized the value of locally grounded, peer-based, and role-specific sources of support. Experienced members trusted superintendents, legal counsel, and informal networks across neighboring districts for assistance. As one member explained, "The people that are dealing with the same kinds of issues we're dealing with are the ones that are actually helpful. They understand the geography, they understand the infrastructure, they understand what we can and can't do".

(RQ2D) How do SBM experiences, challenges, and supports relate to their intention to seek reelection, sense of efficacy, and reported well-being?

Finally, we set out to examine how SBM experiences - their perceived roles, challenges, and support received and desired - related to three key "outcomes": their intentions to seek re-election or reappointment to the board, their sense of self-efficacy on the board, and their reported well-being.

We consider these important outcomes in light of the challenges of holding competitive elections and of recruiting and retaining individuals to serve in these roles. Theory suggests that efficacy and well-being may interact and mitigate the stress resulting from an emotionally taxing job such as governing, especially in polarized times (Flinders et al., 2018; Hochschild, 1983; Weinberg, 2021). Individuals feeling more confident in their service may experience a greater sense of well-being, satisfaction, and likelihood of retention, while those without may experience burnout. We first examine these outcome areas in the aggregate, then explore how various board experiences and perceptions relate to them. These are purely descriptive associations and do not provide causal evidence or directionality between these relationships. Future work should more credibly isolate potential drivers of re-election intent.

Overall, about half of SBMs said they will run for re-election, while far fewer planned to pursue a public office other than a seat on the school board. The majority reported that board service positively contributed to their personal development. Several patterns emerged in the associations between SBM experiences and these outcomes. First, SBMs intending to seek re-election generally reported more favorable experiences on the board and higher levels of training than those who may not or do not plan to run again. Second, members' reported sense of efficacy was higher in contexts with lower political conflict, fewer culture war pressures, and stronger training and governance capacity. Third, political conflict, district conditions, and training were associated with SBM reports of wellbeing, in the expected directions.

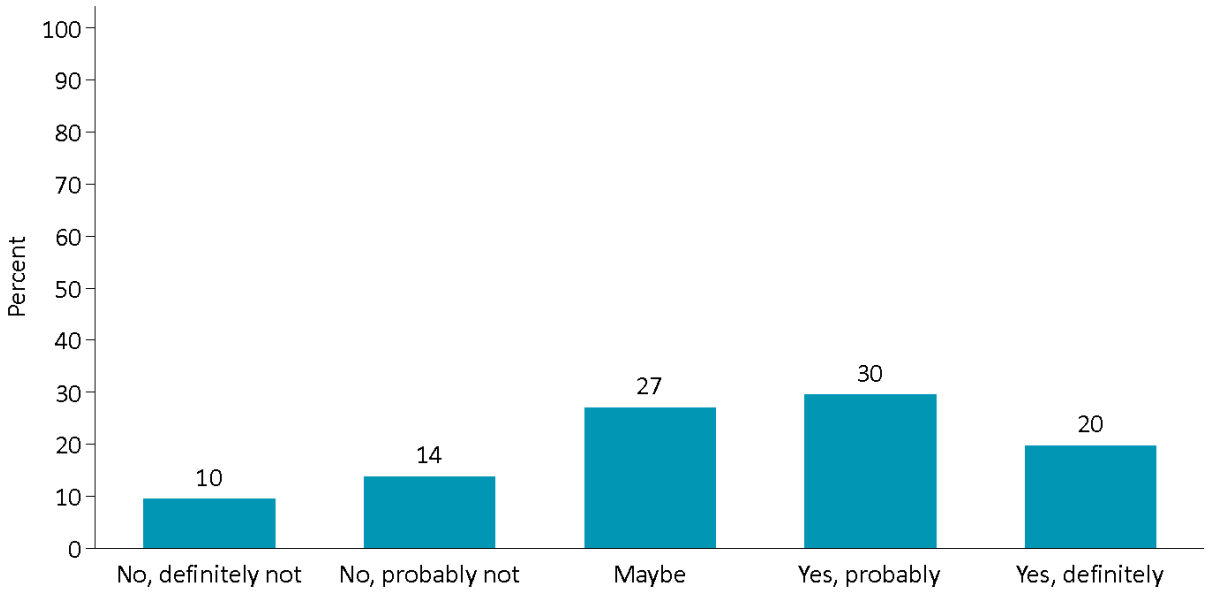
Members were split on whether they planned to pursue reelection but generally felt board service was a positive experience. About half (49%) of members said they will either probably or definitely run for reelection or pursue reappointment on the school board, with 24% saying they definitely or probably would not pursue reelection and 27% responding "maybe," as displayed in Figure 28. A much smaller share said they probably or definitely plan to pursue another public office other than school board in the future (15%), although 32% responded "maybe." That said, a large majority agreed that board service has positively contributed to their personal development (90%), as shown in Figure 29. A minority of respondents said board membership negatively impacted their emotional well-being, although it was a non-trivial share (25%). Male members were more likely to say that they may run for higher office in the future (59%) than women (37%). Interestingly, we did not observe

major differences in agreement that board membership had contributed positively to members' personal development based on the economic makeup of the district (Appendix Table A9a-b).

SBMs who intend to seek reelection report more favorable experiences of board service and higher levels of training. Re-election-intending members reported more positive governance conditions, including stronger relationships with constituents and district leaders and lower levels of tension around labor relations. By contrast, members who were uncertain about or did not intend on seeking reelection more often described their role as politically challenging. Differences between groups centered on political pressure, conflict, and the personal costs of board service, with the strongest contrasts tied to experiences of public and social media exposure. Members who do not intend to seek reelection reported higher levels of political strain, including greater pressure to step away from public office and more frequent experiences of derogatory or personal attacks related to their board role, particularly through online and social media channels. We illustrate these relationships visually in Figure 30.

Figure 28. Member Self-Reported Retention Indicators

Intent to Seek Reelection or Reappointment on the School Board (n=527)



Intent to Run for Public Office Other than School Board in the Future (n=344)

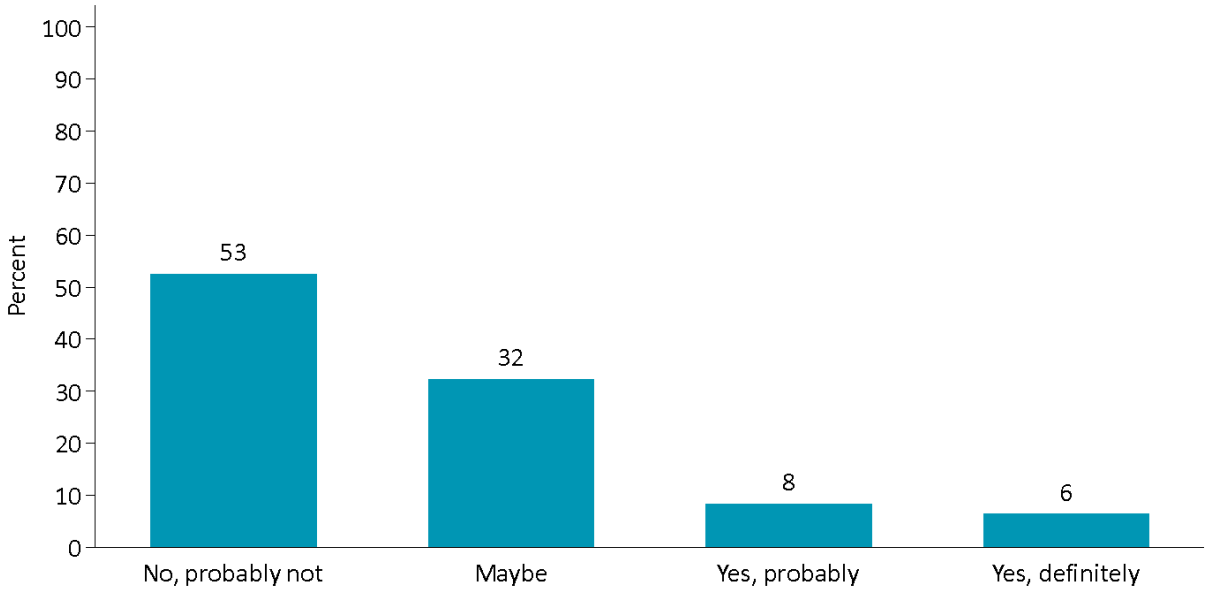
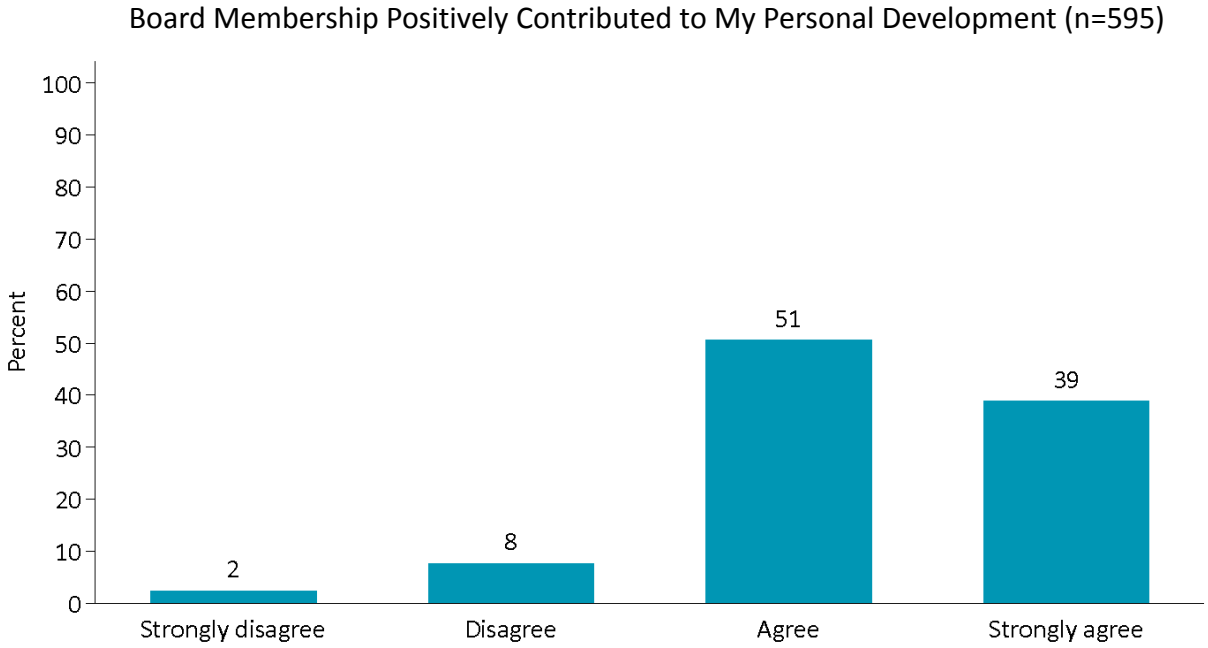


Figure 29. Perceived Membership Effects on Member Development and Well-Being



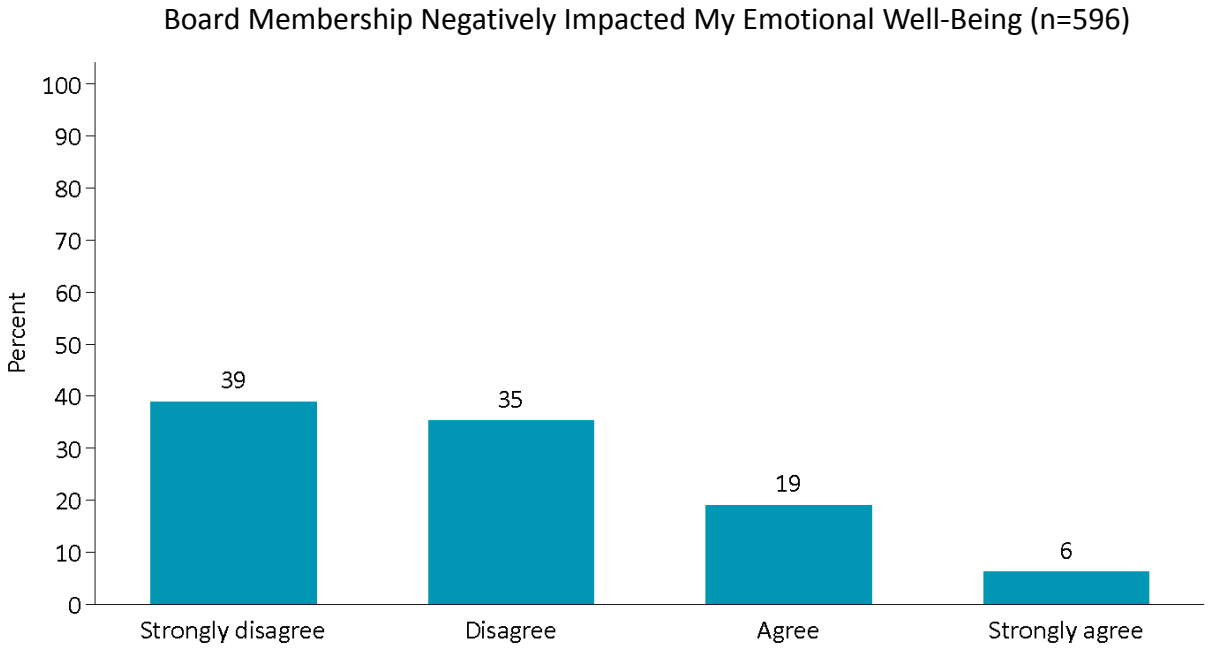
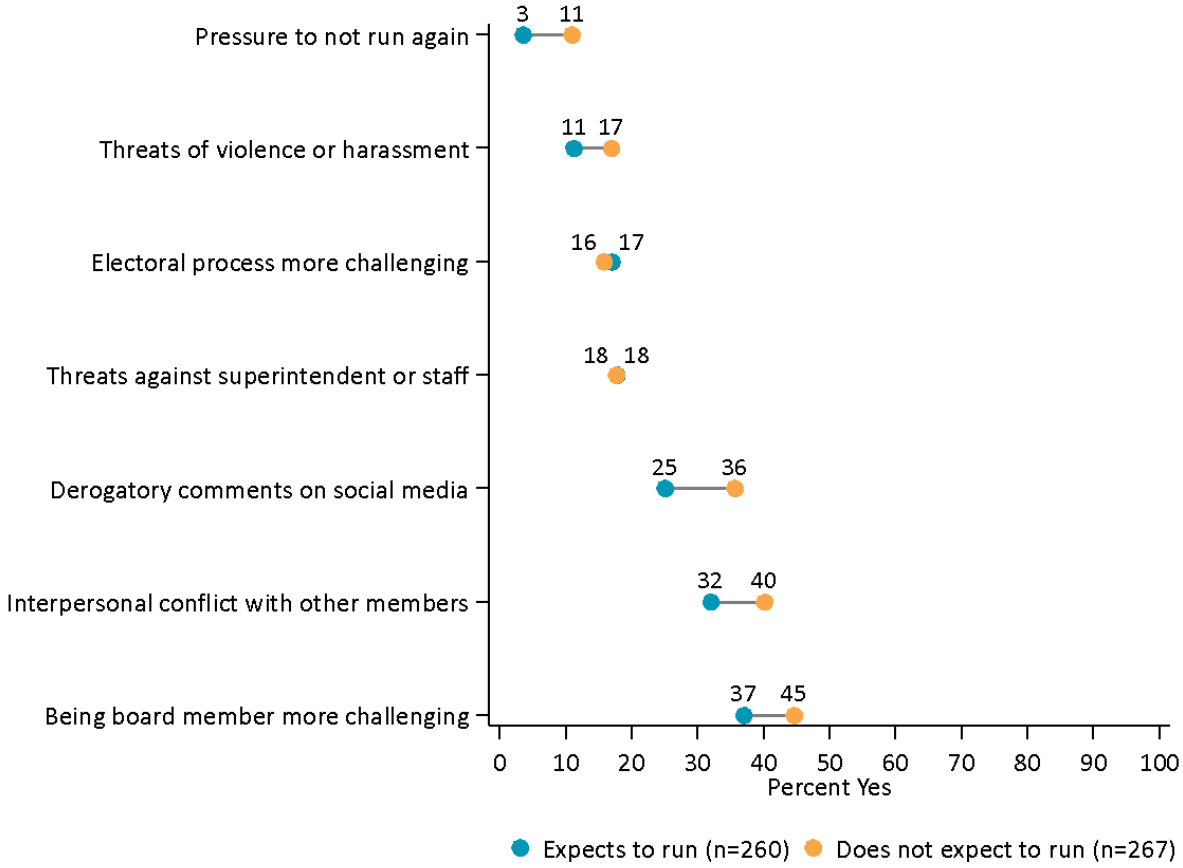


Figure 30. Political Pressures and Challenges, by Reelection Intent



Deep Dive: Re-Election Intent

Given members were split on their intent to run for re-election, our follow-up interviews provided an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the factors impacting their decisions. We purposefully interviewed 10 survey respondents who varied in their intent to seek re-election, ranging from firm refusals to firm commitments to run again. Once again, we also drew from the other 21 "deep dive" interviews, in which these topics often arose unsolicited. We found interviewees were facing significant pressures in terms of the time and other sacrifices needed to be an effective board member. While the national political environment may have had some influence on re-election decisions, more traditional issues of local control and local politics were more salient for members' day-to-day experiences.

Personal tradeoffs were central determinants of reelection decisions. *During interviews, emotional well-being emerged as a critical factor influencing members' motivation to seek reelection, especially amid the stress of public scrutiny and criticism, being targeted during contentious elections or meetings, and navigating conflictual relationships. One SBM from a small city noted how personal board elections had become, recalling:*

> *When I ran the first time…there weren't a lot of personal attacks. We're a relatively small town, and it was about the issues. This last cycle, it was deeply personal. There were a lot of personal attacks and misinformation. And honestly, like for me, I just feel like I'm not sure I want to put myself through that again.*

Members consistently described board service as significantly more time-intensive than expected, and several noted stepping down from leadership positions, such as Board President, due to the substantial responsibilities and demands compared to those of a regular member. Furthermore, family dynamics played a meaningful role in reelection decisions. As one long-serving board member explained, "I just really felt that my time has come. My kids are in their 40s now. They're no longer in school. My grandkids are in elementary school, so it's not like I can be there to, you know, support them." Supportive family structures enabled continued service, while caregiving demands, career changes, or life transitions often appeared to prompt exit.

SBMs also reported facing sustained emotional strain due to public and online hostility, including hate mail, verbal attacks, and social media vitriol. Individuals who experienced online hostility worried for their family's safety, particularly when attacks extended to their families. For example, a member from a small rural district expressed concerns about her children's well-being, explaining, "The politics are so divisive, and I have children in the school district. It scares me because people are getting more and more retaliatory." Many interpreted these incidents as intimidation tactics intended to pressure them to step down. For a few members, such experiences had the opposite effect, strengthening their resolve to seek reelection.

During the interviews, members described the reelection process itself as an additional burden, noting that online scrutiny and threats often intensify during campaign periods. One Republican member from a Bay Area district described the campaign process as "vicious at the

school board level." As he described some of the challenges of close scrutiny due to campaigning, he empathized with those who chose not to run for the board:

> *…You go from the best liked person in the community to the worst liked person in the community in no time flat. And a lot of people recognize that, and they say, "Why would I put myself through that? Why would I put my kids through that if I have kids in the district?"*

Though national issues mattered, the local political climate was most salient. *Board members consistently emphasized that local dynamics such as community relationships, district performance, and interpersonal trust carried more weight in reelection decisions than national politics. Interviewees who intended to seek reelection emphasized the importance of serving on a board where collaboration and stability are maintained by all members, even when they disagree politically. One long-serving member from a politically purple district described this approach as key to her longevity on the board. She explained, "I try very, very hard to keep my politics to myself and be very respectful of people…People in this community have no idea where I am on the political spectrum, but they know my heart's in the right place." Constructive conflict is normalized and accepted when it remains issue-focused, occurs in private settings, and is grounded in professionalism. Board cohesion is sustained through a combination of ideological alignment, structured mentorship, and formalized behavioral norms. As one Bay Area member shared, "We do have frictions occasionally, but we don't do that in public. In closed sessions, there are sometimes what I would describe as some spirited discussions, but I don't remember any anger." However, SBMs also cautioned that the absence of conflict can stem from a culture of groupthink and silence, reflecting suppression rather than genuine cohesion. One Republican member noted a tendency toward board deference to district staff and the superintendent as opposed to robust discussions on some issues:*

> *Do you basically defer to the superintendent and always have unanimous votes? I've had the term "stay in your lane" thrown at me quite a bit, you know. "Know the role of the board and the board members." Or is it one where it could be more of an activist board where, sure, a good functioning district may be 90% or 95% of the issues are no problem, but occasionally there might be a healthy debate where perhaps the board would weigh in and come up with a different conclusion than the administration?*

The availability of a trusted successor was often a condition for exit. *Several SBMs described the availability of a capable successor as a key factor shaping their decision not to seek reelection. Members were more willing to step away when they believed someone else who was aligned with their values could carry forward the work competently. One member from a Southern California district explained that succession planning was not always directly tied to partisan affiliation. Instead, she noted, "I don't have to agree with you politically. We don't have to see things the same way. But I would only support someone who really genuinely cared about all kids." By contrast, participants who feared that their seat might be filled by someone with limited experience or opposing views were more likely to pursue reelection, despite personal costs. For these members, reelection was seen as a way to guard against destabilizing change.*

Recruiting capable successors proved difficult in practice, even for members who were actively trying. Several described reaching out personally to candidates they believed would serve well, only to be turned away because of the scope and complexity of the role. Some participants felt state policy demands made board service unappealing relative to other civic pathways. One member from a suburban, politically purple community shared that although she had decided to retire, it had been increasingly difficult to find someone to replace her:

> *I have talked to six possible candidates so far…people that I know that I thought would serve really well. Two of them would rather pursue a city pathway and be a city council member dealing with potholes and trees and whatever, rather than…all the issues that come up with the state. So yeah...all six of them are hard no's. I'm running out of a list.*

SBMs' sense of efficacy was higher in contexts with lower political conflict, fewer culture war pressures, and stronger governance capacity. Across both efficacy measures—perceived ability to make a difference in student wellbeing and belief that one's perspective shapes board decisions—efficacy was related to district conditions, political context, and governance relationships. Members serving in more favorable contexts reported higher levels of efficacy, as illustrated in Figure 31. Political conflict emerged as another perceived constraint on efficacy. Culture wars issues, in particular, showed substantial negative associations with members' sense that they can improve student wellbeing, perhaps by shifting attention away from student-centered priorities toward conflict

management. Similarly, heightened political conflict, and tension around labor unions was associated with lower confidence that one's perspective shapes board decisions, as we show in Appendix Table A10a-b.

Governance capacity and training consistently differentiated board members with higher versus lower levels of efficacy. Having received training was associated with greater confidence in making a difference for students, with especially robust patterns for training related to understanding and approving the annual budget and LCAP, as well as interpreting and using data to inform decisions (see Figure 32). Training also distinguishes board members who feel more influential in shaping board decisions; those reporting higher levels of influence are more likely to have received training across multiple governance domains. In contrast, members who express a desire for additional training in key areas tend to report lower efficacy, consistent with the idea that unmet capacity needs may dampen confidence.

Members' self-reported well-being was lower in contexts with political conflict, and higher in districts with more positive conditions and greater training opportunities. Across measures of both personal well-being and strain, members serving in more favorable district contexts reported more positive personal development and lower levels of strain, consistent with the possibility that well-being is shaped at least in part by the environments in which members serve. Relationships among board members appeared particularly consequential, with stronger relationships associated with more positive personal experiences of board service (see Appendix Table A11a-b).

Political and issue-specific tensions emerged as predictive of lower self-reported well-being. Conflict related to teaching about race, perceived threats to traditional values, anti-semitism, and transgender issues showed especially strong associations with lower reported positive personal development and higher levels of strain. However, factors beyond identity politics, such as labor union issues, also predicted self-reported negative impacts of service on well-being. More broadly, political conflict was strongly associated with negative personal impacts across both measures, with slightly sharper patterns for the strain-focused item, suggesting that conflict may be especially salient in generating personal costs even when positive aspects of service remain present. See Figure 33.

Governance supports, particularly training, were consistently associated with more positive personal development and lower reported strain. Members who reported having received training across governance domains, such as budgeting and LCAP development, interpreting and using data to inform decisions, and superintendent oversight, described board service as having a more positive impact on their well-being. The association between training and personal well-being was consistent across both measures, reinforcing the potential for supports and capacity building in sustaining board members personally.

Figure 31. Perceived School District Conditions, by Contributions of Service to Personal Development

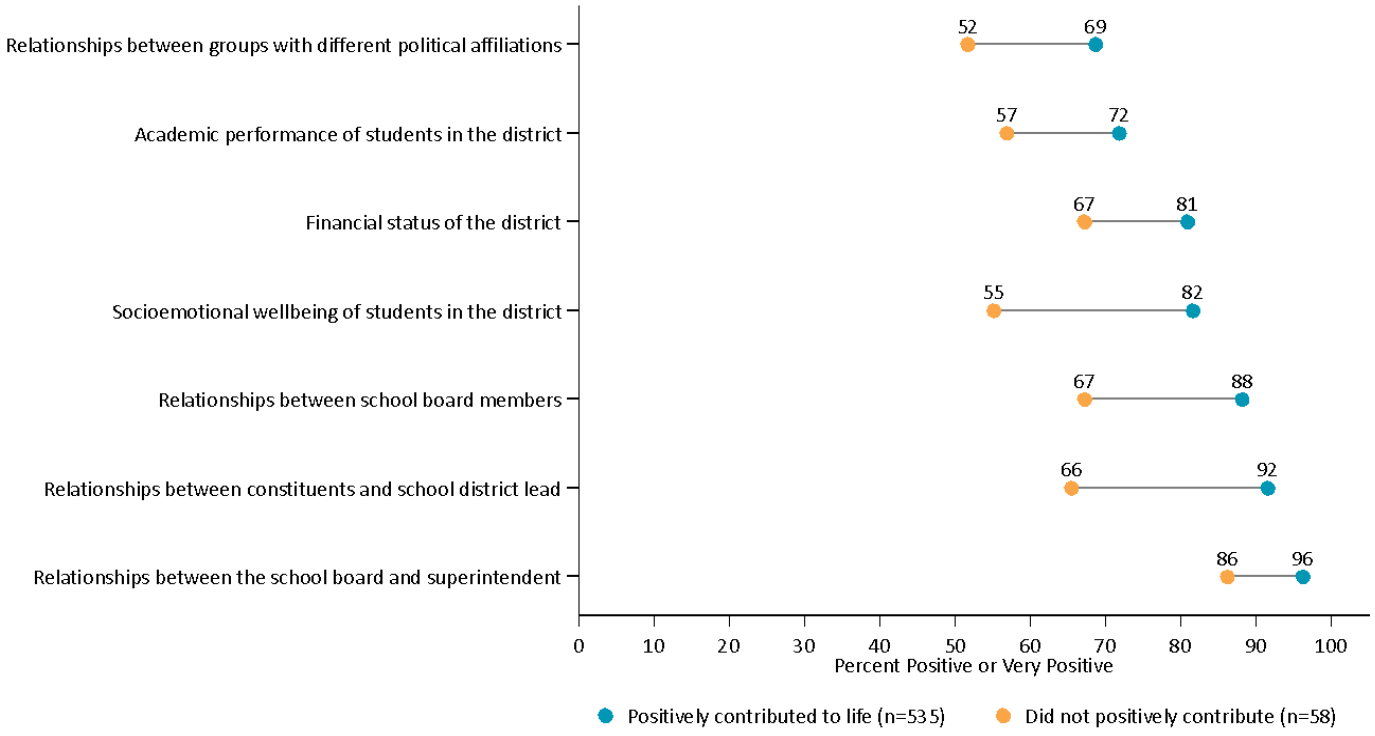


Figure 32. Areas Where Members Have Received Training, by Member Self-Efficacy

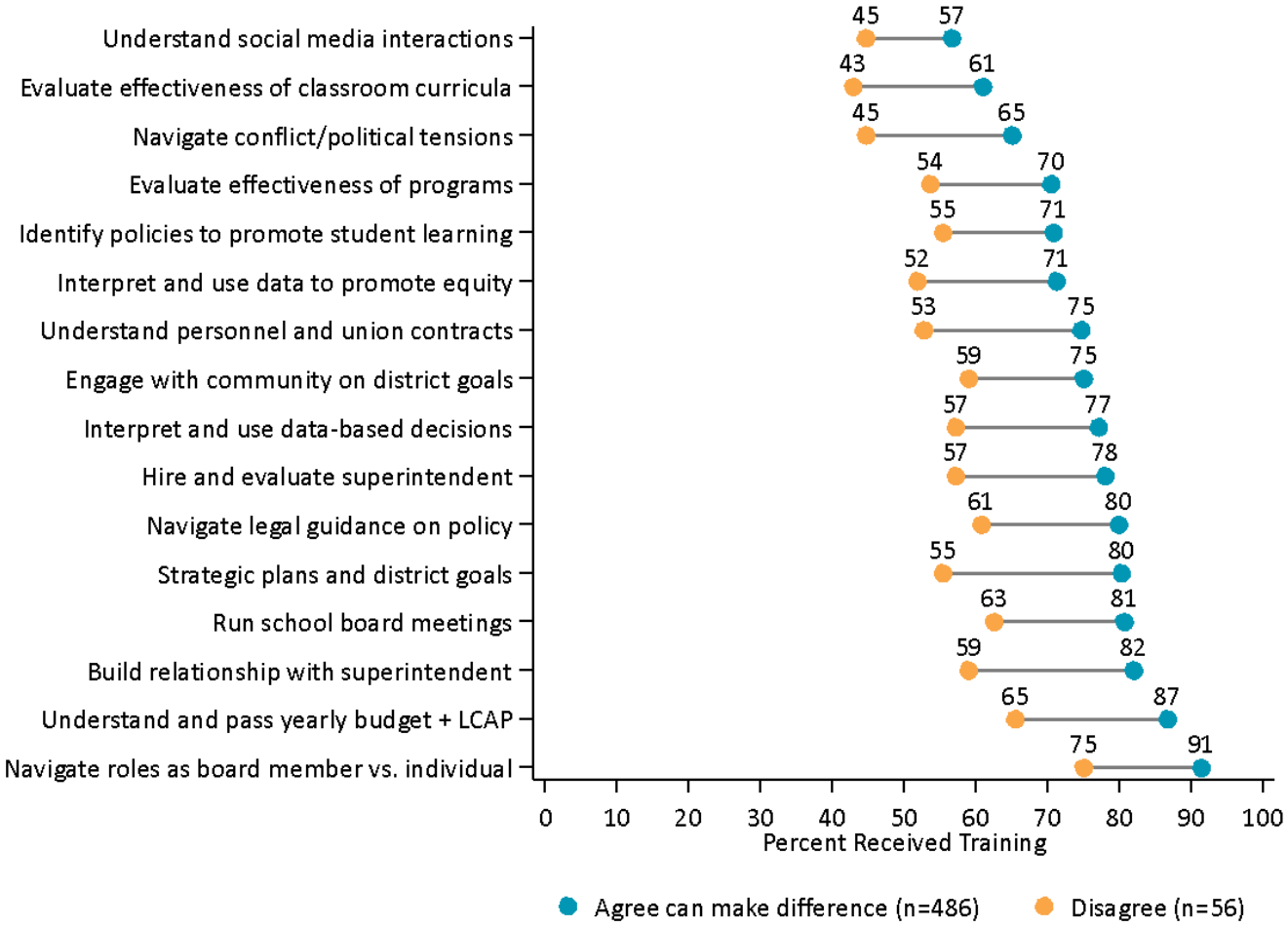
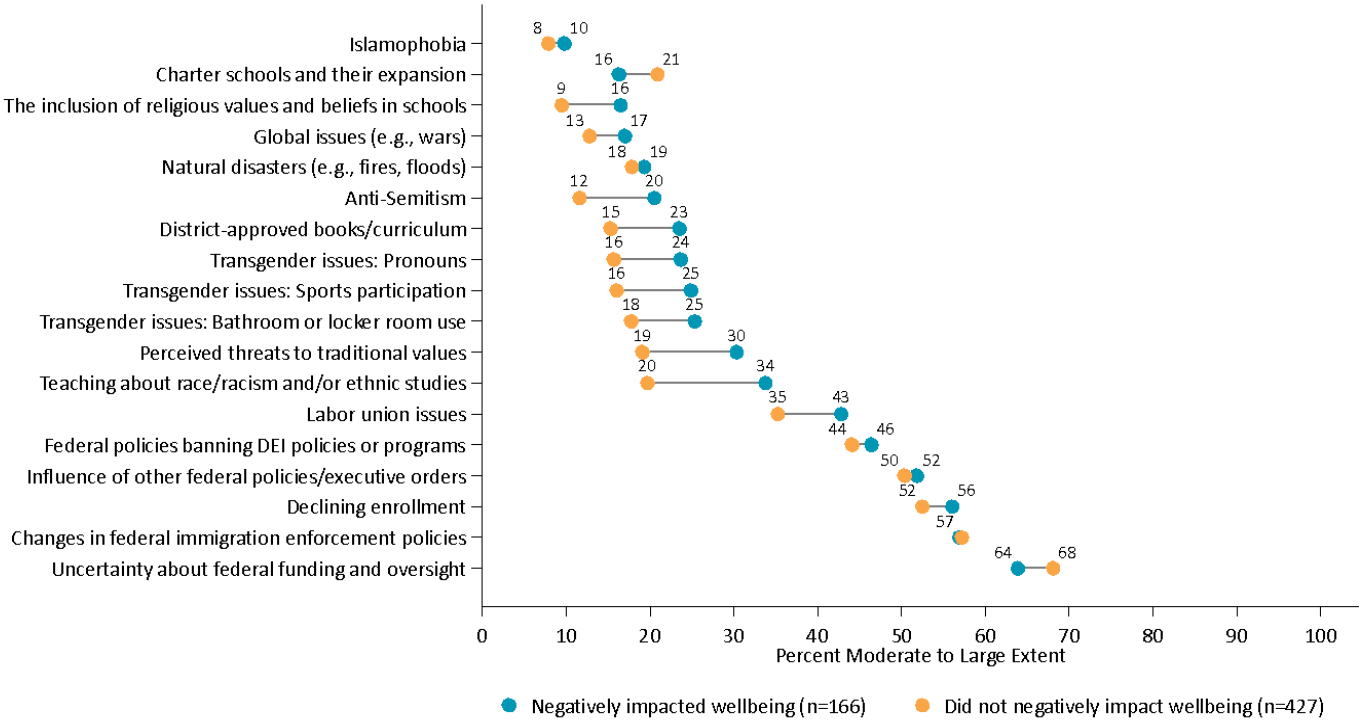


Figure 33. Sources of Strain, Tension, or Conflict, by Impact of Service on Member Emotional Well-Being



RQ3. How are board members engaging their communities, and to what extent do these forms of engagement inform decisions?

One major facet of the board role is to represent, be accountable to, and engage the community. CSBA notes, "Board members have a responsibility to involve the community in meaningful ways in setting a direction for the district and to communicate clear information about district policies, educational programs, fiscal condition, and progress on goals" (CSBA, n.d.). LCFF policy requires boards to engage interest holders in developing resource allocation and accountability plans. Yet, research demonstrates that community participation in board activities is often quite limited and efforts to engage individuals representative of the full community is challenging (Hall et al., 2023; Marsh & Hall, 2018). To this end, we sought to understand how SBMs were engaging their communities, and if challenges emerged.

Overall, SBMs drew on a similar set of activities to engage their constituents and generally found these strategies to be useful. The majority also believed that community engagement improved

the work of their board and was in favor of including students as board members. Yet about half reported challenges in engaging a "representative" group of individuals in board activities, noting that a few individuals dominated these activities and that their districts struggled to obtain input from underrepresented groups.

SBMs reported using a common set of activities to engage constituents. As Figure 34 illustrates, the vast majority of SBMs reported that their boards use traditional school board meetings (97%), school-sponsored events (93%), and individual communication (89%) to engage parents, community members, district staff, and organizational partners. At least half of SBMs also cited LCAP meetings (70%), study sessions (61%), committee meetings (59%), and group-specific meetings (52%). Some forms of engagement were more commonly reported in city and suburban districts and large districts, most notably study sessions, committee meetings, and group-specific meetings (see Appendix Table A12a-c).

The majority of SBMs found these engagement strategies useful. As Figure 34 illustrates, more than two-thirds cited all of the listed activities as either useful or very useful for informing and/or influencing board decision-making. Nevertheless, a non-trivial minority appeared to question their value - notably adhoc town halls and study sessions. The aggregate survey findings run slightly counter to some of our qualitative data. Case study SBMs in our pilot, for example, consistently reported that traditional school board meetings in particular were not conducive to meaningful engagement with constituents, as state open meetings laws prevented members from engaging in two-way discussions or responding to "non-agendized" issues that emerge. Others noted the challenges of highly contentious board meetings. Yet some members interviewed post-survey shared that new board policies developed in response to previously unproductive meetings had shifted dynamics. For example, one SBM from a politically purple, suburban district described working with their legal team to streamline procedures to push back against disruptive meetings:

> We have had to really tighten up our meeting. Our attorney instructed us exactly what we needed to do to meet the spirit of the law regarding public comments…There are a lot of right-wing activists who travel around. After about maybe three or four meetings of that real tight protocol where we had a script and the script was very clear, "'You are entitled to your right to free speech. You are not entitled to disrupt our meeting. If you disrupt the meeting again, you will be asked to leave." That's what we did. We just parroted that. And after about

> three or four more meetings, when they saw they couldn't hijack our meeting or [it] was too difficult, they kind of went away and just basically focused on other districts.

Similarly, another member representing a rural, Northern California community shared that unproductive, disruptive board meetings may have become less prevalent because of new district leadership and an unwillingness to engage with the people disrupting meetings:

> I would say, like five years ago…up until… two years ago, [disrupting board meetings] was the thing to do. You know, that was what you did once a month. You'd go to the board meeting, and that was your 15 minutes of fame. You'd get up in front of everyone and complain about something. Yell at the board members, you know? …But that has slowed down a little bit because we have a superintendent now that just doesn't really respond to drama. He doesn't react… They're not getting the same level of payback and stimulation from that kind of interaction.

The majority of SBMs agreed having a student member effectively includes student voices. About three-fourths of SBMs either agreed or strongly agreed that having student board members is an effective way to include the voices and perspectives of students on educational decision-making (Figure 35). Interestingly, SBMs in large districts were more likely than their counterparts to agree, as were women and non-white SBMs (see Appendix Table A13a-c).

Figure 34. Types of Community Engagement in the Past Year and their Perceived Usefulness

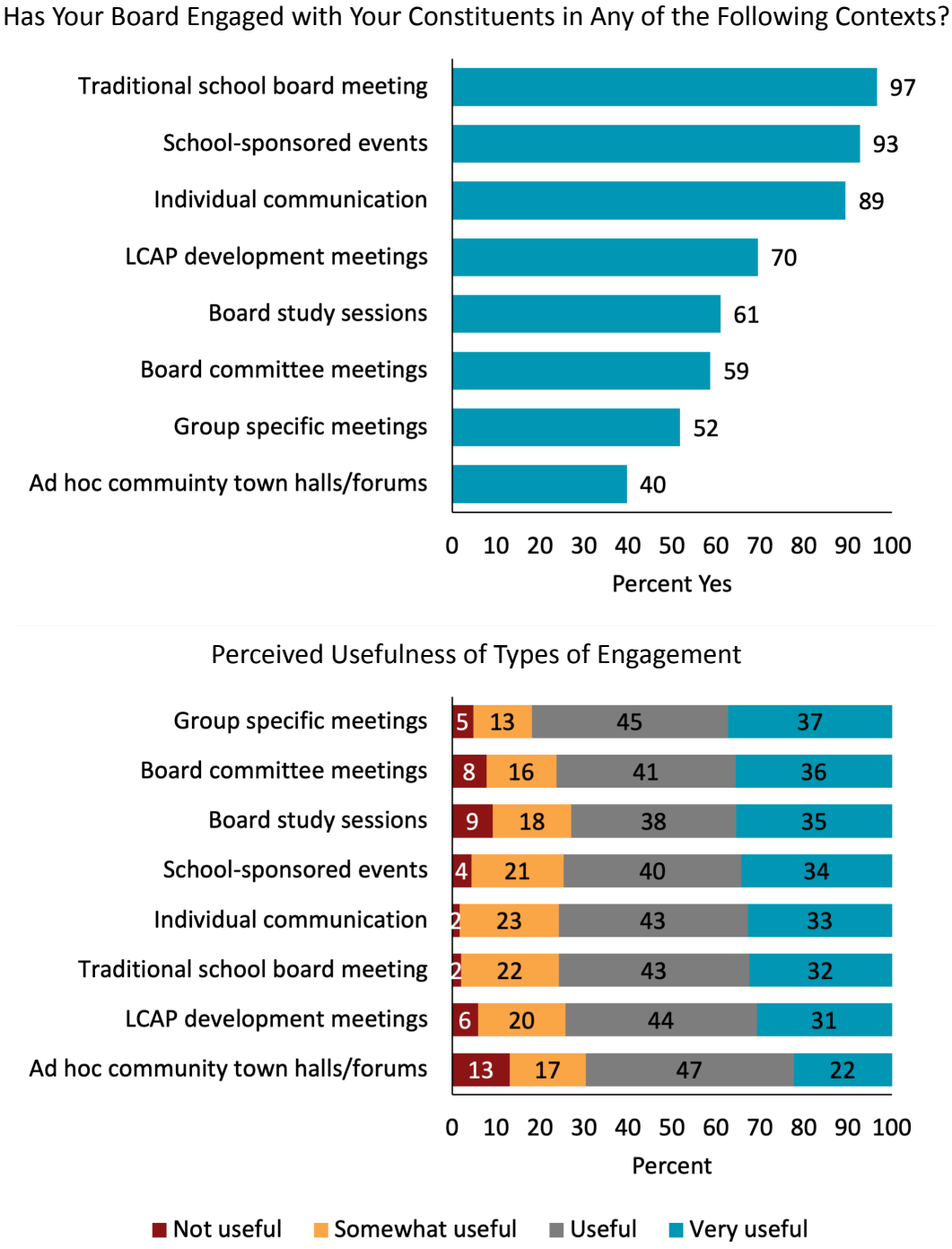
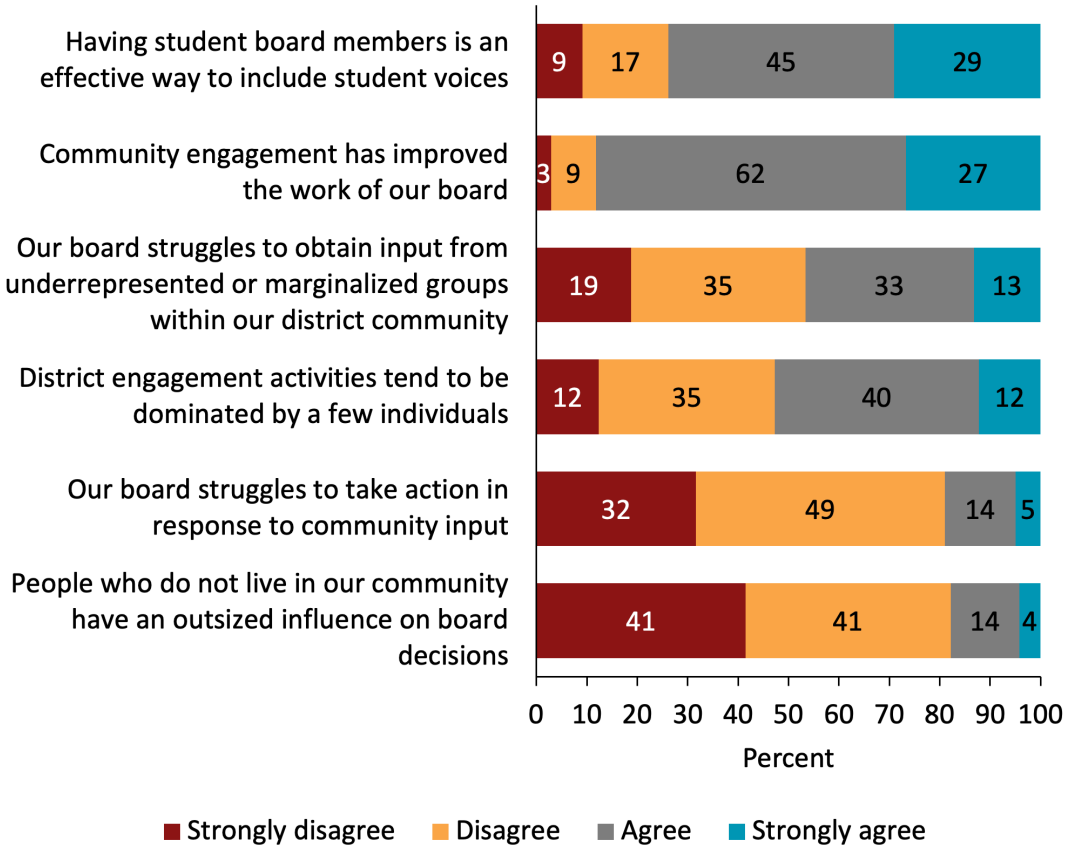


Figure 35. Perceptions of Community Engagement (n=591)



A large majority of SBMs agreed community engagement has improved the work of their board. As Figure 35 illustrates, 89% of SBMs either agreed or strongly agreed that community engagement has improved the work of their board. Though not all engagement activities were perceived to be meaningful by SBMs interviewed, when they were seen as meaningful (i.e., not performative, allowing for two-way communication, inclusive of quieter voices), these opportunities often yielded valuable input into board decisions. For example, one member recalled that their formal LCAP process had become a much more collaborative opportunity to partner with community members on district improvement:

> So two superintendents ago, when it was first brought in, I think because it was new, [the LCAP process] was more like … a checklist, like, "Oh yeah, we've done these." And since then, …when writing the LCAP, we have a series of three or four workshops for anyone…teachers, parents, whoever wants to come in. And then it's…a "post-it" workshop where everyone can just express their thoughts about a topic.…then somebody organizes all those thoughts and

> finds the overriding themes of each one, and then…those help shape the LCAP. So, I think there's a lot of community input.

Another member explained that a key factor in their ability to have high-quality community engagement was simple: "Do the right thing. Don't get into big arguments." He continued, "…some of our boards around us spend their time yelling at each other...yelling at the audience, and the parents are yelling at them. How do they get anything done? You know, you can't get work done in chaos."

Some SBMs reported challenges with community engagement - particularly ensuring representation. As Figure 37 above illustrates, more than half of SBMs agreed or strongly agreed that district engagement activities tended to be dominated by a few individuals (52%), while others reported their districts struggled to obtain input from underrepresented groups (46%) and taking action in response to community input (19%). On a positive note, most SBMs are not seeing people from outside of the community playing an outsized influence on board decisions (only 18% agreed). Instead, these pressures appear to come from within the district community, at times leading SBMs to navigate dilemmas of how to engage with community members who are seeking changes or policies that are either not aligned with the member's beliefs or could potentially lead to unintended consequences. For example, one board member from a politically moderate Bay Area community described working to keep "controversial" items off of the meeting agendas, even though they were desired by some politically progressive community members. While sympathetic to their interests, this member believed these issues could derail other victories, given the current composition of their board:

> We're a more conservative board. I look at the extremists in our community who would come out to oppose certain things and I feel like the best thing I can do for some of our students right now is to not turn our community into a circus where it's filled with hateful rhetoric about them. So, in some cases, I think the things I've achieved are just protecting what we already have for our students. Sometimes that feels like a compromise. But when I look at some other districts where controversial things have come up and they've lost ground. I feel like it was probably a good decision for us to try to keep some things off of our agenda in the current political climate.

Notably, SBMs in districts using trustee elections reported more negative perceptions of community engagement and representation, whereas SBMs in at-large districts were less likely to report these challenges (Figure 36). More negative perceptions were also somewhat more common

among SBMs in large and city districts, and to a lesser extent, suburban districts (compared to smaller and town/rural districts), Democratic SBMs (compared to Republicans), and SBMs who ran opposed in the prior election (compared to those in uncontested races) (see Appendix Tables A5 and A12-A14).

A plurality of members expressed uncertainty about whether the families participating in board-sponsored events reflect the communities their districts serve. As shown in Figure 37, only 38% of respondents rated participation as "quite" or "very" representative of the broader district, while 46% said "somewhat" and 16% said "not at all" or "not very." This uncertainty is consistent with the engagement challenges board members reported more broadly (see Figure 36), namely that relatively small shares of members, and particularly those in small districts, agreed that boards struggle to get input from underrepresented groups (14–31% by district size) or that engagement is dominated by a few individuals (14–33%), though both concerns were notably more common in larger districts.

Figure 36. Perceived Community Engagement Challenges, by District Size and Electoral System

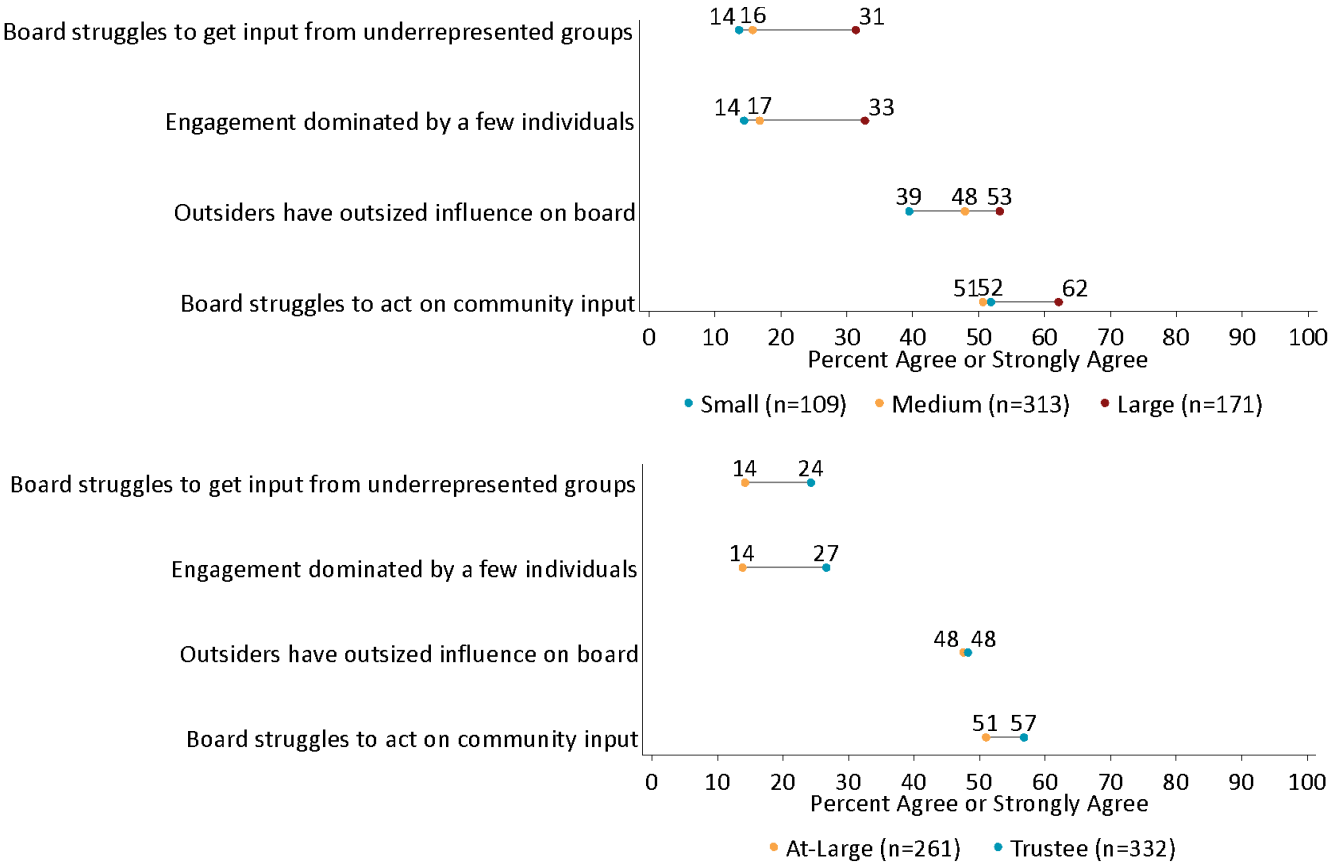
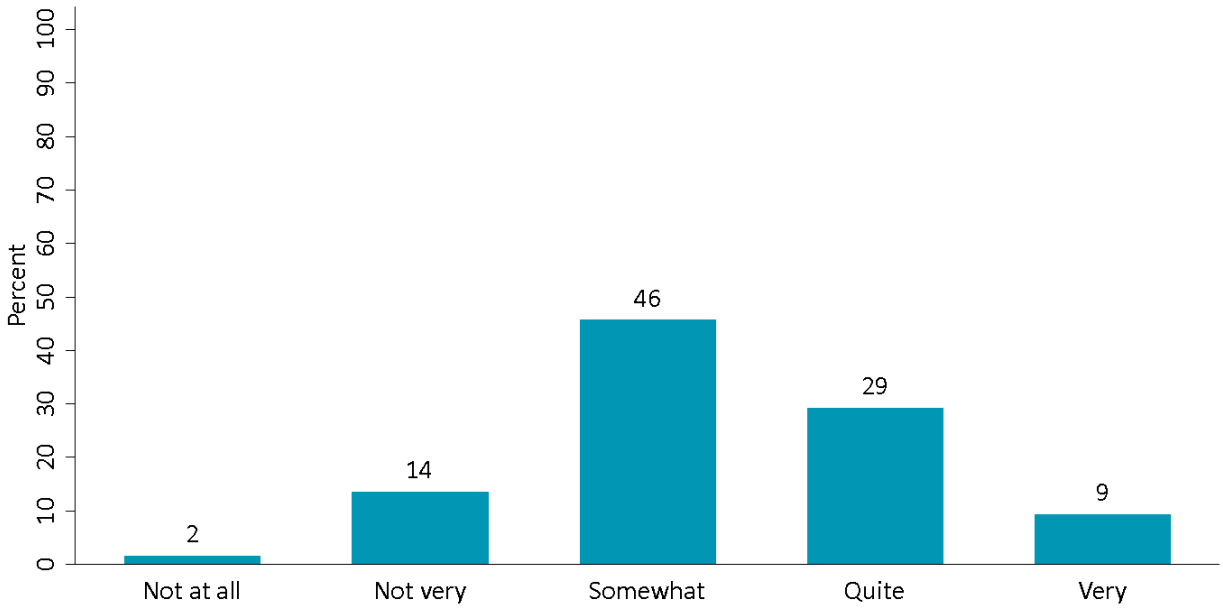


Figure 37. How Representative of the District Are Families Participating in Board-Sponsored Events? (n=600)



RQ4. How do board members use data? How do their perceptions of student achievement relate to actual student achievement outcomes?

Nationally, there is a general consensus that data use represents a "best practice" of school board service (Dervarics & O' Brian, 2019). In California, embedded in the board's responsibility to ensure "accountability to the public" is the expectation that members use data to "establish systems and processes to monitor results, evaluate the school system's progress toward accomplishing the district's vision and communicate that progress to the local community" (CSBA, 2013, p. 2). Given their role in overseeing the process for reviewing and adopting instructional materials, there is an additional expectation that members understand how to interpret reviews of curricular quality and standards-alignment. Under the state's LCFF policy, there is also an implicit expectation/assumption that members use performance data from the California School Dashboard and other sources to inform the development of the district's LCAP and district goals, and to monitor district progress toward meeting LCAP goals. With this context in mind, we asked board members about their data use practices, and examined the extent to which members' perceptions about student performance aligned

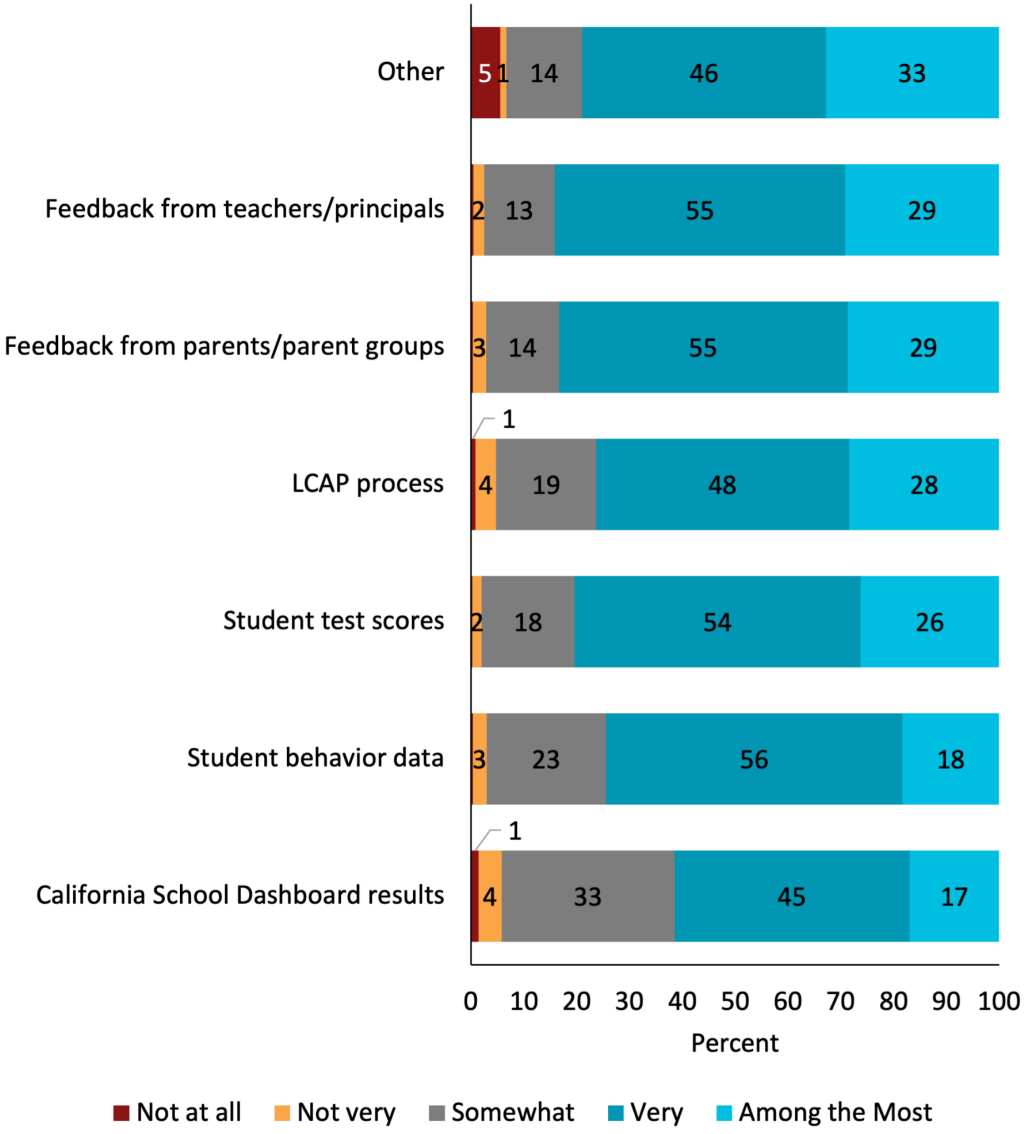
with actual test results. Building on the challenges of using data expressed to us by our pilot study cases, we also gauged their interest in obtaining more support related to data and evaluation.

Overall, we found that SBMs valued a wide range of data, including not just student academic and behavior data, but even more so, feedback from stakeholder groups, to set priorities for the district. Their perceptions of district academic performance were generally consistent with actual test-based achievement results, though a majority of members in below-average performing districts overestimated the academic performance of students in their district. Board members themselves expressed an overwhelming interest in receiving more training in how to use data and evaluate the effectiveness of district programs and curricula.

SBMs said feedback from teachers and parents was more important than academic and behavior data for priority setting, but these data were also seen as important. A large majority of members indicated that student test scores (81%) and student behavior data (75%) were either very important or among the most important factors in setting annual board priorities. However, even larger shares of respondents said that feedback from teachers or principals (83%) and from parents or parent groups (83%) were very important or among the most important for prioritization. See Figure 38.

Members in below average achievement districts indicated that student test scores and behavior data were somewhat more important for setting their annual priorities than members in above average achieving districts. See Appendix Table A15a-c. Although there were no partisan differences in the importance of student performance indicators, Democrats said feedback from parents or parent groups was less important than that of members from other political parties, perhaps due to recent shifts in the partisan valence of the concept of “parental rights” in the period after COVID’s onset.

Figure 38. How Important Are the Following in Setting Annual Board Priorities? (n=725)



Member perceptions of their district's academic performance were moderately related to actual test-based achievement, but a non-trivial share overestimated performance. Recall that large majorities of members generally rated the academic performance of students in the district positively (70%), as well as the socioemotional well-being of students in the district (79%). In general, test scores in math and reading were correlated with board member perceptions of academic performance in their district. As we show in Table 5, average test scores in both math and reading were lowest for those

rating their district's performance as "very negative" (-0.56 SD in math and -0.52 in ELA) and highest for those rating performance "very positive" (0.27 SD in math, 0.19 SD in ELA).

However, there was quite a bit of variation in the actual performance of districts within each assessment category. Among those rating achievement "very positive" included members from districts with average math scores between -1.22 and 1.55 SD. In Figure 39 we show the full distribution of test scores (math on the top and reading on the bottom) for those who indicated a positive (in blue) assessment of their district's performance as well as for those who provided a negative assessment (in red), showing substantial overlap in the distributions between those with positive and negative perceptions of their district's performance. These patterns of results remain when we examine changes in test scores from 2019 (pre-pandemic) to 2024 rather than simple 2024 test score levels. Put another way, 54% of members in below-average achieving districts rated the academic performance of their district positively.

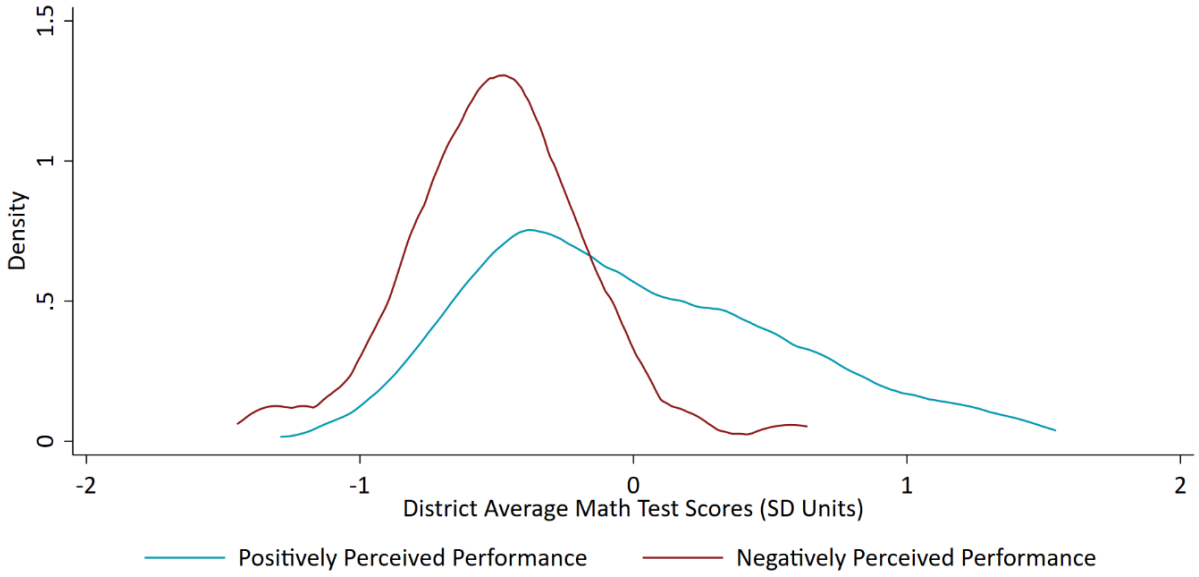
There was significant demand among board members for training in data use and evaluation. As previewed above, three of the four areas where the greatest share of board members said they would like more training were related to evaluation, including: evaluate the effectiveness of classroom curricula (79%) and of district programs and services (78%), and identify which policies will promote student learning (79%). Large majorities also indicated that they would like more training in how to interpret and use data to inform decisions (74%) and to advance equity (68%). SBMs had lower levels of confidence in their data and evaluation skills than in many other areas, as previously illustrated in Figure 20. SBMs were more likely to report that they had already received some training on nearly all data and evaluation-related topics, and had higher confidence in using data to inform decisions, if they were serving in higher-performing versus lower-performing districts. Members were also more likely to want more training on nearly all data and evaluation-related topics in higher-performing than in lower-performing districts.

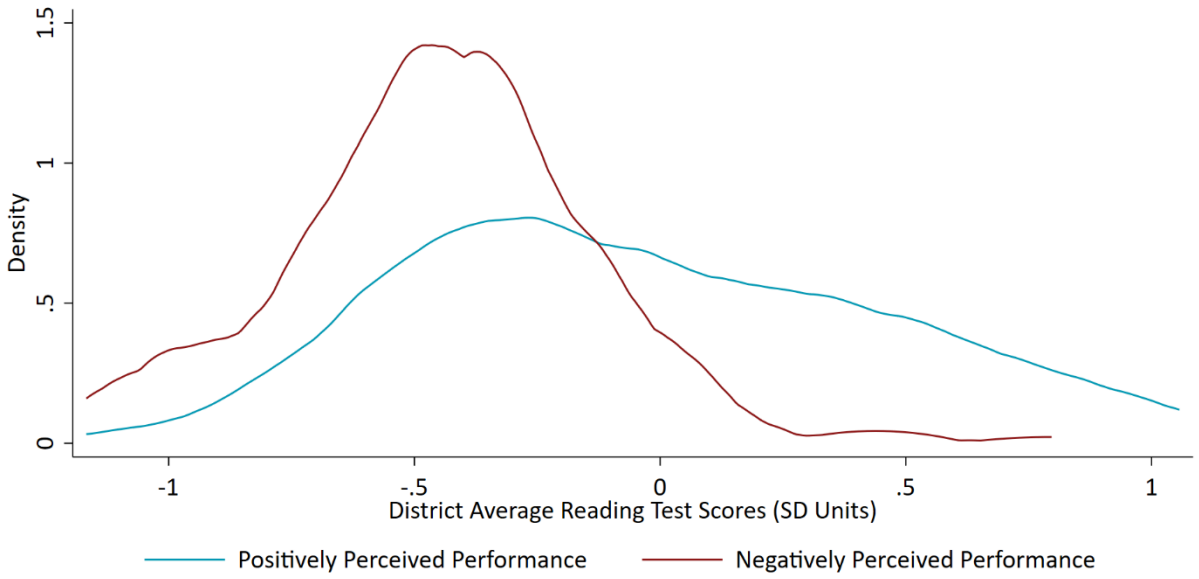
Table 5. Board Members' Perceived Academic Performance of District Students, by Actual Test-based Performance

	Test Score Levels (2024)				
	Math (n=579)				
	Obs	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Very negative	26	-0.56	0.24	-0.97	-0.13
Negative	154	-0.49	0.35	-1.45	0.64
Positive	314	-0.09	0.51	-1.29	1.35
Very positive	85	0.27	0.69	-1.22	1.55
	Reading (n=568)				
	Obs	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Very negative	26	-0.52	0.24	-1.04	-0.18
Negative	149	-0.43	0.32	-1.17	0.80
Positive	309	-0.09	0.44	-1.16	1.06
Very positive	84	0.19	0.56	-1.17	1.06

	Change in Test Scores (2024 - 2019)				
	Math (n=578)				
	Obs	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Very negative	26	-0.13	0.08	-0.28	0.10
Negative	154	-0.12	0.17	-0.91	0.35
Positive	313	-0.05	0.16	-0.64	0.50
Very positive	85	-0.01	0.17	-0.58	0.46
	Reading (n=568)				
	Obs	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Very negative	26	-0.18	0.06	-0.34	-0.07
Negative	149	-0.15	0.19	-0.84	0.73
Positive	307	-0.12	0.17	-1.12	0.73
Very positive	84	-0.09	0.15	-0.70	0.30

Figure 39. District Average Math and Reading Test Scores, by Perceived Performance





Implications

Overall, although SBMs highlighted many bright spots, our research indicates there are many opportunities for California to strengthen its system of school boards. Realizing the vision of effective, locally controlled, democratically governed school districts will require attention to electoral issues, public engagement, capacity, and the state's role in education governance.

Electoral Issues

Lack of representation and diversity. Consistent with national research (e.g., Kirst & Wirt, 2009; Kogan, Lavertu & Peskowitz, 2021; Houston & Hartney, 2025), our data indicate that California board members were not demographically representative of their constituents. They had higher incomes and education levels and were more likely to be white than the population as a whole. Some scholars/theorists argue that this demographic matching – or "descriptive representation" (e.g., Pitkin, 1967) may not be necessary, as members can effectively represent the interests of those they serve, including those with whom they don't share identities, "substantive representation". Shared traits may not guarantee representatives will act in ways that are aligned with constituent preferences (Daramola et al., 2024). In fact, recent empirical work suggests that ideology matters more than the demographic characteristics of members for policy and educational outcomes (Biasi et al., 2025).

Others, however, cite the importance of descriptive representation, as members may be more attuned and responsive to constituents' interests and needs when they have shared identities, with their lived experiences importantly shaping how they go about substantively representing constituents (Phillips, 1998). Indeed, prior studies have found that when people of color gain access to local political office, it leads to greater educational spending on and higher academic achievement outcomes for non-White students (Kogan et al., 2021; Fischer, 2023). This matching may also signal to members of underrepresented groups that they are valued as full citizens in a democratic process (e.g., Banducci et al., 2004). Moreover, if local boards are spaces to build leadership capacity in communities, there are also arguments that society benefits and equity is advanced when individuals typically underrepresented in other public offices serve in these roles (Henig et al., 1999).

Limited competition in elections. Our data also raise questions about the level of competition and health of the democratic process within local school board elections. Consistent with other research (e.g., Kogan, Lavertu & Peskowitz, 2025; Lambert & Willis, 2024), we find that almost half of board members engaged in this study ran unopposed or were appointed in their prior elections. That said, these uncontested elections were concentrated in smaller districts. When we weight by district size, we find that 27% of students are represented by a member who ran unopposed in their previous election. Nonetheless, the prevalence of uncontested races has important implications for democratic representation and community engagement in local education governance, as voters in these districts then have limited opportunities to influence board composition through elections.

In theory, competitive races allow for more voices and choices in elections. They may enhance democratic accountability, as voters can effectively weigh in on how their elected official is representing them and performing their role by having an option to vote them in or out. The prospect of competition may also enhance members incentives to address community needs and meet with them (Achen & Bartels, 2017). Further, contested races may create critical opportunities for public debate on educational matters that could improve the quality of elected officials' policy recommendations. The lack of competition thus removes these key levers. This climate might open the door for groups with outsized power to influence elections in ways that do not represent the community, such as an external interest group sponsoring a candidate because they know there will likely be no opponent (Henig et al., 2019: Reckhow, et al., 2017). More broadly, the lack of interest in serving suggests potential disengagement from the community with public education or even lost trust in the public school system.

Yet, the benefits of electoral contestation must be understood in the context of our findings about the challenges reported by SBMs who had recently run in a competitive race. As noted, these individuals were more likely than members who had run unopposed to report certain sources of strain (e.g., conflict around politically contentious issues), challenges with board operations, political pressures, and a desire for more training. They also indicated feeling less efficacious in the role and that serving had negatively affected their well-being when compared to their counterparts. Therefore, steps taken to make elections more competitive must be accompanied by a commitment to supporting those

who win. It may also be more difficult to recruit individuals to serve if they anticipate a competitive race, suggesting efforts should also be made to support candidates in the electoral process.

Re-election uncertainty and turnover. The finding that only half of SBMs were "probably or definitely" planning to run again and that many were still unsure only adds to these concerns about electoral contestation and who is serving. Our qualitative findings suggest some of the reasons behind these decisions. For some individuals, serving became infeasible given the time commitments and competing family and work demands. For others, a perceived lack of local autonomy led them to feel less efficacious and less willing to continue serving. For still others, the emotional strains of the political climate – including the stress of public criticism, social media vitriol, and concerns about personal safety – made continued service untenable. In some cases, internal dysfunction, conflict, and mistrust within the board reduced motivation to seek reelection. In fact, our survey data suggests strong associations between self-efficacy, emotional well-being, and re-election intentions.

Nominally, some turnover may be desirable. Board members feeling uninterested or unable to meet the responsibilities or time commitments are not necessarily serving the best interests of the community. Members who feel uninterested in, or unable to meet, the responsibilities and time commitments of the role may struggle to effectively serve their communities. In fact, SBMs interviewed emphasized that when service begins to negatively affect personal well-being or family stability, stepping down can be a responsible and self-aware decision rather than a failure. Bringing in newer voices with greater time, energy, and interest might help revitalize the important work of a board.

On the other hand, frequent turnover could leave the district with limited institutional knowledge and hamper long-term planning and sustained action. Members bring accumulated understanding of district history, community relationships, budget cycles, labor dynamics, and the political context surrounding prior decisions, which is not easily documented or transferred, and varies considerably across districts depending on available staff capacity, county office support, and access to professional development resources. Research suggests that districts with high board turnover had weaker member knowledge of roles and responsibilities and constituent needs, and that effective conflict resolution was associated with lower turnover rates (Alsbury, 2008). Other research has long-documented the importance of leadership stability for sustained improvement and district performance and the potential negative effects on policy and practice amidst churn (Hess, 1998).

Turnover can also lead to inefficiencies resulting from the continual reinvestment in onboarding. Moreover, our findings illustrate experienced members tend to feel more efficacious in their roles. Though we cannot determine the direction or causality of this relationship, it is possible that serving longer contributes to an accumulated sense of competence from navigating actual board decisions, which is then lost when individuals decide not to run again, leaving boards with a rotating set of members who are perpetually earlier in their learning curve.

The potential negative effects of board turnover may be compounded by the simultaneous high rates of turnover among superintendents. From 2019-20 to 2025-26, 69% of school districts in California experienced one or more superintendent transitions (the national average was 62%; White, 2026).[5] Additionally, only 38% of superintendents new in 2020-21 were still in their positions in 2025-26 (the national average was 44%). These collective indicators of leadership turnover raise concerns about the stability of school systems and their ability to sustain improvements or implement policy with consistency over time.

Furthermore, incumbents' decisions to eschew re-election could lead to even more uncontested races, which, as discussed previously, raises a host of challenges for our democratic system and community representation. In some cases, when no one is willing to run, sitting members appoint officers. This, in turn, prompts additional concerns, including diminished accountability to the community and potential appointments of like-minded or status-quo-oriented members. Relatedly, our interviews indicated that some SBMs are deciding not to run for re-election only once they have been able to identify a like-minded successor, which could undermine the spirit of open, democratic elections, shifting accountability away from voters to networks, potentially entrenching particular interests. Though there may be benefits to outgoing members mentoring candidates, it may also erode community trust if it gives the perception that voters matter less than "insiders."

Trustee-area election tensions and tradeoffs. The move to restructure elections from at-large contests to voting within trustee areas is intended to enhance representation from historically marginalized communities in geographically concentrated areas. Although our research cannot determine if these goals have been achieved, we nonetheless agree that democratic principles and civil rights considerations support expanding board leadership opportunities to community members who

[5] In some cases, school board members are contributing to these decisions – either directly not renewing contracts or indirectly participating in strained relationships that may lead to departures (White et al., 2023).

might otherwise face barriers to successfully running in district-wide elections. Our research does, however, reveal some possible tensions and challenges with what it means to be an elected member in trustee-based systems. SBMs in trustee areas were more likely than those in at-large districts to report negative board operations and relationships with internal and external interest-holders. They were also more likely to report problems securing representative and meaningful engagement from the community. Our data do not allow us to say whether trustee-based electoral systems were a cause of such challenges. However, qualitative data indicated that, in some cases, it was difficult to identify people to run in these smaller areas due to financial constraints (people had less time to contribute to the board because they needed to work), historical marginalization (people were not used to being heard/represented in those spaces), and other issues, such as fear of immigration policies - ultimately leading to appointments to the board.

Possible directions for addressing electoral issues:

→ ***Expanding and diversifying the pipeline of SBMs via recruitment and support.*** *It would behoove policymakers and researchers to better understand the factors making the role infeasible, unattractive or simply not known to many individuals, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds and in smaller geographic areas. The contextual knowledge of county offices of education, other regional bodies, and partner organizations could be leveraged to help to broaden the pool of potential board candidates (though with an explicit recognition that these are nonpartisan positions). This might involve investing in outreach to communities, educating them on the role of boards and how to run. State policymakers or other partners might consider providing tools to help candidates navigate the electoral process or support other civil society groups doing this work. One potentially bright spot in our findings is the low levels of campaign spending reported by most members who successfully won elections. Raising awareness of this may remove one potential barrier to recruiting potential candidates to run. In the process, decision-makers should stay alert to potential exclusionary practices when building a pipeline, engaging in succession planning, or appointing members.*

→ ***Making the job more manageable****. Recent state actions allowing for increases in SBM pay may prove to be an important first step. Additional actions could further build support to ensure that SBMs are capable of serving and more likely to stay in the position, should they want to, while*

retaining constituent trust. Supports focused on navigating conflict and difference on the board are particularly important. Our data also suggest that opportunities for locally-driven mentorship, regional networks, or networks of similar districts are potential avenues to consider. Shared administrative support via networks or county offices - particularly for boards in small districts - might also be worth considering. The field might also consider a comprehensive examination of all the responsibilities/duties spelled out in the education code to identify possible changes that could focus the role on a more manageable set of responsibilities (e.g., Kirst, 1994).

Public Engagement

Our study surfaced some concerns about the role of the public. Although most SBMs reported that community engagement improved the work of their board, many shared challenges with obtaining representative and inclusive participation in board activities and wanted more training in this area. These data suggest many community members are not particularly active in the work of school boards – a pattern consistent with prior research on low attendance at board and district events (Collins, 2021; Elliot, 2023; Marsh et al., 2018) as well as voting in board elections (Hartney, 2021).

Prior research offers several possible explanations for the low level of participation. Studies have found that the majority of Californians, parents in particular, want to be engaged in local education decision-making and feel they have the skills and knowledge to do so (Allbright & Marsh, 2019), but often feel that their voices are not valued (Marsh et al., 2018). Other studies beyond California suggest that engagement opportunities sometimes limit participation due to a lack of transportation, child-care and translation services, as well as schedules that do not accommodate working individuals—all of which, in concert with negative feelings of political efficacy, could lead to decreased desire to participate in future decision-making (Downing, 2024; Ewing, 2018; Nuamah, 2021a, 2021b). Culturally insensitive and racist practices also sometimes impede the involvement of marginalized groups (Daramola et al., 2023). Community members may also lack awareness of board-specific opportunities that exist for their involvement or familiarity with the work of a board. In fact, in a 2022 PACE/USC Rossier poll, 53% of California voters reported knowing only a little or nothing "about the roles and responsibilities of local school boards" (Hough et al., 2022). Yet, this same poll affirmed widespread support for the work of boards (Hough et al., 2022).

As such, there may be a missed opportunity to convert support and interest into meaningful engagement. There also remain large gaps in our understanding of how citizens perceive their boards and districts, and what it would take to enhance their participation and the information available to them. Though the SBMs in our study generally painted positive pictures of their work, we do not know what the community thinks about their performance. This is a fruitful area for future research as prior studies have highlighted discrepancies in school boards' responsiveness to community demands, particularly in marginalized communities (Bridgeforth & Pickett, 2026; Daramola et al., 2024, 2026).

Possible directions for enhancing public engagement:

→ ***Providing guidance and examples to SBMs on how to meaningfully engage the public, particularly traditionally underrepresented groups.*** *Options to consider include workshops, guides, training modules, and mentorship opportunities that draw on lessons learned from prior research (Daramola et al., 2024; Marsh, 2007) - particularly around communicating and building trust with racially minoritized communities - as well as the decade-long effort to enhance community engagement in LCAP processes (Knudson, 2016). Research suggests alternative structures that create opportunities for two-way communication (Collins, 2021), as well as partnerships with local organizations (Marsh & Hall, 2018; Marsh et al., 2018) may also assist with engagement.*

→ ***Raising public awareness.*** *State and local leaders and partners might consider efforts to enhance public understanding about the roles and responsibilities of the board. This communication could help enhance not only public participation in board activities but also in voting and in widening and deepening the pool of individuals who consider running to serve, though more research may be needed to establish effective strategies.*

Capacity-Building and Support

Our study makes clear that SBMs would like more support in a number of areas that are central to their roles and that could help them better respond to the strains they face in the current political moment. This recommendation is consistent with another recent study of California governance that concluded "Insufficient preparation and continuing education for school board members can undermine effectiveness for both schools and board members: schools may receive less effective

support, while board members struggle to engage meaningfully without adequate guidance and training" (Myung et al., 2025, p.44). Our data also suggest a need for differentiated support, a topic we revisit below.

Data use and evaluation. SBMs are expected to interpret data and evaluate programs as fiscal stewards and policymakers in their districts, and most surveyed valued data of various types in their work. Yet many either wanted or demonstrated a need for more support in this area. Recall two of the top four areas where SBMs wanted more training pertained to evaluating the effectiveness of curricula and district programs, and identifying which policies promote learning. Most also wanted more support around how to interpret and use data to inform decisions and to advance equity, and reported lower levels of confidence in their data and evaluation skills than in many other areas. Moreover, a majority of members in below-average achieving districts rated the academic performance of their district positively, further suggesting a need for more support in this area.

Navigating shifting federal and, to some extent, state policies. The shifting federal landscape at the time we fielded our survey - including around immigration enforcement, funding and oversight, other federal policies and executive orders - was top of mind for many SBMs. These were not only issues frequently cited as sources of strain or factors that impeded board progress, but also areas in which SBMs explicitly requested more support. In fact, "navigating legal guidance on changes in state and federal policy" was the most cited topic in which SBMs wanted more training. In qualitative interviews, several wondered what role the state would take to support districts given the diminishing federal role in education – particularly around issues of special education. Others feared that state intervention, the threat of potential litigation, or increased attention from federal authorities led their board to avoid controversial decisions, effectively applying a chilling democratic deliberation. The extent to which these concerns remain front and center, beyond the early months of the new administration, remains to be seen but is worth monitoring.

Labor union and fiscal issues. Many SBMs cited labor union issues as a source of strain that frequently impeded efforts to advance board goals. Consistent with this challenge, more than two-thirds wanted more support around "personnel and union contracts." Relatedly, strong concerns about declining enrollment and uncertain federal funding suggest another area that may benefit from guidance and support. Recent legislation adding mandatory training around school finance for all SBMs

is an important advancement in this area.[6] Given the combination of fiscal strain and growing threats of (and votes for) union strikes across the state (Xie, 2026), both topics are ripe for attention.

Navigating conflict – including social media interactions and racialized conflicts. Our research indicates a general desire for more support around managing the politics and conflict surrounding board service. Many SBMs felt that being a member was more politically challenging than they had expected and had experienced interpersonal conflicts within the board. About a third had experienced derogatory personal comments on social media, and only one-fourth of those surveyed said they felt very confident navigating social media interaction. In fact, more than half of SBMs explicitly wanted more training around navigating social media interactions. The need for more support in these areas may be even more acute for particular board members. Notably, women, members in trustee-area elections, and those running opposed were more likely than their counterparts to experience most of these political pressures. Our findings also point to a potential need for more support around navigating conflicts that invoke race. SBMs were less likely to agree that their board had policies that would allow them to successfully navigate this conflict when a hypothetical conflict was framed in a way that foregrounded race. Ongoing debates over state policies, such as ethnic studies, and federal policies regarding DEI bans, suggest this issue is likely to continue in the future.

Types of training – differentiated support, local options, and networks. Finally, the diversity of experiences reported to us in this study, based on district context and individual characteristics, highlights a need for differentiated support. For example, members in lower-income, larger, and lower-performing districts expressed less confidence in and greater desire for support in numerous areas. Reported strains varied often by SBM electoral experience or the partisan profile of their community. Surveyed members also indicated a strong interest in local sources of training and support, including network-based or mentorship opportunities. Qualitative data further revealed a desire for training tailored to local contexts and needs, cautioning against a "one-size-one-size-fits-all."

Possible directions for building capacity and support:

→ ***Developing partnerships and greater investments in regional and/or local sources of professional development for board members****. SBMs may benefit from professional development focused on the*

[6] AB 640 mandates 4 hours of training for district, county, and charter board members in school finance and accountability laws.

priority areas of data use/evaluation; labor, fiscal, and legal issues; and navigating politics and conflict. Providing these opportunities before individuals take office may also broaden the pool of people willing to serve. There may be a role that the research community and schools of education can play, especially in providing professional learning related to data and evaluation and perhaps in connecting analytic capacity to school boards and superintendents.

→ ***Supporting networks, mentorship, and training tailored to local contexts.*** *Though our data do not speak to whether or not more mandated training will help, voluntary networks were viewed quite favorably by many SBMs in our study and might be worth exploring. Some participants noted the need for specialized training directly related to their unique contexts (i.e., small city or rural districts). Additionally, member reliance on superintendents as a source of training could potentially raise concerns given the board's primary responsibility for evaluating the superintendent. As district-level fiscal realities continue to tighten in an era of declining enrollments, increased costs, and an uncertain federal funding landscape, SBMs may benefit from flexible approaches to board training that help them meet the needs of their individual communities.*

→ ***Providing supports to address the emotional and psychological demands of board service.*** *The strains of public criticism, social media conflict, and personal safety concerns create challenges for a non-trivial share of members, and our data suggest associations between emotional well-being, self-efficacy, and re-election intentions. Leaders might provide supports in these areas and also pursue efforts to more broadly reduce the acceptability of incivility and political violence.*

→ ***Researching effective models of professional development.*** *As there is limited empirical evidence on the effectiveness of school board training models, state leaders might consider funding rigorous research to identify best practices for board member capacity-building.*

→ ***Learning from what other states have done to support their SBMs*** *(see Text Box below).*

What can we learn from how other states build school board members' capacity to serve?

SBM preparation and professional learning opportunities vary widely across the U.S. Each state's board membership association (e.g., California School Board Association) is a primary hub for socialization, networking, training, and guidance in governance and law. These organizations are often tasked with helping boards meet their state-level requirements for training, which vary widely by state. For example, Henrikson (2024) explains that 42% of states require SBMs to undergo finance training, and 36% require training on member roles and responsibilities. Yet, only 20% require training on superintendent-related issues or evaluations, and just 4% require training on collective bargaining, though of course many states are "right to work" and do not allow for this (Henrikson, 2024). Our study suggests that California board members want additional training and support, locally and statewide, to help them meet the current challenges of district governance. To spur further thinking around how best to address this need, we offer several examples of professional development strategies from states around the country.

1) ***Training requirements that go beyond fiscal management and ethics laws.*** *As we examined board training requirements across the country, several state policies stood out. Alabama, for example, requires 6 hours of annual training, but also makes a point that 2 of those hours must involve the whole school board. This practice, may support shared learning and understanding of the board's roles and responsibilities. Some states (e.g., Arkansas, Connecticut, Kentucky) have also instituted structured training requirements based on years of service. Kentucky board members with zero to eight years of experience must complete 12 hours of training covering ethics and open meetings/records laws within the first 12 months of initial service, with an additional three hours of finance and one hour of superintendent evaluation within the first two years. Annual requirements are reduced to eight hours for members with more than eight years of service.*
2) ***State resources for locally-guided board training opportunities.*** *Several states offer SBMs direct funding to support locally-driven professional learning at limited or no cost to the district. Idaho, for example, appropriates $6,600 per district or charter school each fiscal year*

to be used specifically for board and superintendent/charter school administrator learning. These funds can be used with the Idaho School Boards Association, but that is not a requirement. Other states, like Missouri, have extensive requirements for board training (i.e., 18.5 hours within their first 12 months of service), but have chosen to make mandated training free for all board members in the state through the Missouri School Board Association.

Though we cannot establish the effectiveness of these state strategies, we offer them as fodder for future discussions around how best to provide training opportunities to the diverse set of boards and districts in California. The state might pursue a combination of strategies that enable training opportunities that are both locally-driven and also meet agreed-upon state priority areas required for effective district governance. Any effort to develop policy on board capacity-building should likely engage and build on the expertise of major partners and organizations currently offering support and training, along with local board members.

The Role of the State

One final cross-cutting implication of our research pertains to the role of the state. According to surveys, the majority of SBMs wanted to limit state directives and mandates and allow for more locally determined decisions. Yet a substantial minority wanted more state-level guidance. Qualitative interviews provided important nuance to these seemingly mixed views – indicating members were not overwhelmingly opposed to state involvement in principle and valued legal compliance with state policy, but instead disliked the state's tendency to design "one-size-fits-all" policies that do not account for diverse local needs and contexts. Some even sensed a trend toward recentralization, in tension with LCFF and the commitment to local control. Survey results indicating a desire for more training also suggest that SBMs recognize they may need more support to fulfil their roles (though, as noted above, they often wanted that support to come from local entities that understood their contexts and needs). Though our findings cannot speak to broader state policymaking or assess how the state governs, they do suggest a critical, ongoing role for the state - particularly in facilitating the vision of local control

spelled out by LCFF and ensuring that members can effectively govern in the face of the complex challenges they and their districts are facing.

Possible directions for strengthening the role of the state:

→ ***Maintaining a state role in facilitating local control**. All of the possible directions described above underscore the important role the state plays in ensuring open and healthy board elections as well as local capacity to govern. For example, if state policy requires SBMs to make decisions on resource allocation, including an assessment of the effectiveness of programs, state leaders have a responsibility to ensure SBMs are supported in data use and evaluation. Capacity to serve also requires individuals to feel confident, efficacious, and safe in these roles, and the state might facilitate providing support to this end.*

→ ***Attending to local differences when creating policies, particularly mandates.** SBMs interviewed consistently highlighted a perceived "top-down" approach to state-level policymaking that did not always account for the amount of local variation in a state as large as California. While state leaders regularly engage with advocacy and membership organizations (e.g., ACSA, CSBA) and hold regional hearings on large matters of policy, they might consider expanding direct engagement with local leaders to understand the potential impacts of new policies and the current capacities that districts have to implement them.*

→ ***Developing stronger guidance to district leaders – SBMs and superintendents – on how to address declining enrollment and dwindling fiscal resources.** A great source of strain for local leaders has been the growing challenge of limited financial resources. SBMs expressed interest in engaging with districts similar to their own to learn from each other on how to effectively meet these challenges. State leaders might consider working with advocacy organizations, researchers, and community groups to facilitate more local and regional networks specifically focusing on these fiscal issues.*

Together, these considerations related to electoral issues, public engagement, capacity, and the state's role in education governance, offer a meaningful path toward strengthening school board governance in support of an effective and equitable public education system for California.

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