

Virtual School Board Listening Tour Findings

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Ballotpedia's Virtual School Board Listening Tour

Table of Contents

/irtual School Board Listening Tour Findings	1
ntroduction	2
School Boards and their conflict styles	3
How school board members see their roles with respect to academic outcomes	12
The overall responsibilities of school boards for academic outcomes	16
Goals that individual school board members hope to achieve in their term of service	21
Dynamics between board, board members, and superintendents	27
What school board members wish voters and the media understood about them	31
Overview: School boards come in three flavors	36



Introduction

Ballotpedia's Virtual School Board Listening Tour was a qualitative research initiative conducted throughout 2024 and 2025. The goal of the initiative was to develop a deeper understanding of how school board members across the United States view their roles, responsibilities, and challenges.

Ballotpedia launched the project as part of its overall multi-year goal of covering all elections in the United States, including all local elections – and that includes school board elections in the country's 13,500 public school districts. The idea was to learn more about the people who occupy these uniquely interesting positions of community trust in order to make sure that our coverage of their elections serves their communities well.

During the Listening Tour, dozens of Ballotpedia staffers conducted hour-long in-depth interviews with 100 current and former school board members from a wide range of districts—urban, suburban, and rural; large and small; politically diverse and politically homogeneous. Participants represented 33 states and varied regional and political contexts, in order to capture a broad spectrum of experiences and viewpoints.

While each district is unique, common themes emerged across interviews—particularly in how board members understand their role in shaping student outcomes, managing district resources, and responding to community expectations.

This article provides a summary of key findings from the Listening Tour and highlights the themes that emerged from interviews with board members nationwide. It is intended to serve as a resource for voters, researchers, policymakers, and others interested in the role of school boards in public education.



School Boards and their conflict styles

Overview

Conflict is an inevitable component of any governing body, and school boards are no exception. To better understand the nature, causes, and resolution of conflict on school boards, this section analyzes responses to five related questions asked of 100 school board members across 33 states:

- 1. Do school board coalitions tend to form along predictable lines (e.g. political party, gender, profession)?
- 2. Conflict among some school board members is high (rated on a scale of 1 to 5)
- 3. Disagreements between school board members often become personalized (rated on a scale of 1 to 5)
- 4. Conflict usually results in a clear solution to the problem (rated on a scale of 1 to 5)
- 5. When there is conflict over important issues, does it usually get resolved or does it linger?

Clear national trends emerged—especially around the role of politics in coalition-building, the difference between productive and destructive conflict, and how personality and board culture influence whether disagreements become personal or persistent.

1. Do school board coalitions tend to form along predictable lines (e.g. political party, gender, profession)?

Response Type	Count
Yes, predictable	41
Sometimes/mixed	17
No, not predictable	42

Summary:

This question revealed a near-even split. **41%** said coalitions *do* tend to form predictably, typically along **political lines** or shared professional backgrounds. Another **42%** rejected the idea, emphasizing **issue-based alliances** or fluid dynamics. The remaining **17%** gave nuanced answers: coalitions might form in certain seasons (e.g. during elections or crises) but not persist.

Patterns of Alignment:

- **Politics:** Many boards were described as splitting along left-right ideological lines, especially in swing or urban areas.
- **Profession:** Former educators often aligned with each other, particularly on curriculum or labor issues.
- Values & Personality: Some respondents said coalitions were more about trust, respect, and communication style than demographics.

Representative Quotes:

"We definitely have a progressive block and a conservative block. It's subtle, but it shapes everything from how we vote to how we talk."

- July interview
- "I wouldn't say it's party-based. It's more like... who's loud and who's quiet. It's about personalities."
- March interview

2. Conflict among some school board members is high (scale of 1 to 5)

Rating	% of Respondents
1 (Strongly Disagree)	16%
2	18%
3 (Neutral)	20%
4	25%
5 (Strongly Agree)	21%

Summary:

Just under **half (46%)** of board members rated their board's internal conflict level as high (4 or 5). About **one-third (34%)** rated it low (1 or 2), and **20%** fell in the middle.

Conflict levels varied based on:

- Recent board turnover
- Presence of "problematic" members
- Local political polarization
- Existence of strong norms or board training

Quotes Highlighting Variance:

- "Right now it's calm, but a few years ago, I'd rate it a 5—just awful."
- April interview
- "We disagree a lot but I wouldn't call it high conflict. It's just deliberation."
- May interview
- "We're constantly clashing. Mostly with one or two members who want to be political celebrities."
- October interview

3. Disagreements between school board members often become personalized (scale of 1 to 5)

Rating	% of Respondents	
1 (Strongly Disagree)	24%	
2	28%	
3 (Neutral)	18%	
4	20%	
5 (Strongly Agree)	10%	

Summary:

Only 30% of board members agreed that disagreements often become personal. A strong plurality (52%) said this rarely or never happens (ratings 1–2).

Personalization of conflict tended to emerge when:

- A board member brought a personal agenda
- Long-standing grudges developed
- Debate took place publicly (e.g., on social media)

Representative Quotes:

- "We fight hard in the meetings, but it's never personal. We'll go have coffee after."
- November interview
- "There's one member who makes everything about her. It makes every discussion harder."
- February interview
- "Used to be very personal. Now we've done trainings and it's much more professionalized."
- August interview

4. Conflict usually results in a clear solution to the problem (scale of 1 to 5)

Rating	% of Respondents
1 (Strongly Disagree)	3%
2	7%
3 (Neutral)	28%
4	36%
5 (Strongly Agree)	26%

Summary:

Roughly **62% of board members** believe that conflict usually leads to **productive outcomes** (ratings 4 or 5). Only **10%** said conflicts rarely result in resolution, while a sizable **28%** were neutral.

What helps resolution?

- Skilled superintendents or chairs
- Defined board norms and bylaws
- Focus on student outcomes rather than ideology

Barriers to resolution:

- Agenda-driven members
- Social media drama
- Lack of trust or transparency

Quotes:

- "We argue, but we always vote and move on. That's the job."
- September interview
- "Sometimes the 'resolution' is just that the minority gets steamrolled."
- March interview

5. When there is conflict over important issues, does it usually get resolved or does it linger?

Response Type % of Respondents

Conflict is usually resolved 61%

Conflict tends to linger 39%

Summary:

A **slight majority (61%)** said conflict is generally **resolved**, though that didn't always mean agreement. Some noted that resolution meant "agreeing to disagree." Others saw lingering tensions that **reappeared with new issues**, or during board elections.

Conditions for lingering conflict:

- Disagreements rooted in ideology
- Poor communication among members
- Factional divisions or cliques

Quotes:

"We vote and move on, but resentment can last a while."

— May interview

"Lingering is the right word. It's like old fights never die, they just come back in new forms."

- April interview

Key Takeaways

- **Conflict is common but not universal:** About half of boards reported moderate to high internal conflict, while others cited professionalism and trust as stabilizing factors.
- Coalitions often follow political lines: 41% said board factions were predictable—usually ideological—but others emphasized personality or issue-based alignment.
- Personalized disagreements are the exception, not the norm: While about 30% reported some personalization of conflict, most respondents said their boards maintain respect even when they disagree.
- **Conflict often leads to resolution:** 62% believe disagreements are ultimately productive, with many highlighting how conflict sharpens clarity and decision-making.
- Lingering tensions persist on some boards: Even where conflict is resolved formally, emotional or relational residue can remain—especially if boards lack trust or clear communication norms.

Conclusion

Conflict is not inherently negative on school boards—in fact, many board members described **healthy tension** as essential for strong governance. What differentiates productive boards from dysfunctional ones is not whether they fight, but **how they fight**—and whether they can move forward afterward.

Most school boards report that conflict, even when heated, results in resolution, often through voting, compromise, or structured deliberation. However, political polarization, dominant personalities, and past trauma can undermine even the most well-intentioned processes.

Boards that invest in **governance training**, **collaborative norms**, **and open communication** are more likely to experience conflict as a **generative force**, rather than a destabilizing one.

How school board members see their roles with respect to academic outcomes

Overview

As part of Ballotpedia's Virtual School Board Listening Tour, 100 school board members across 33 states were asked to define the role that an **individual** board member should play in relation to **academic outcomes**.

Their responses reflect a widespread understanding of the **governance–management boundary**, but also illuminate important variation in how board members balance **oversight**, **accountability**, and **community engagement**.

Statistical Summary

Out of 100 total responses:

Response Type	Number of Respondents
Ask questions / stay informed (but not intervene)	42
Act as a liaison / ambassador to the community	25
Support and trust administration without micromanaging	22
Push for accountability when progress stalls	18

Emphasized limits	of individual power	(requires board action)	16
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Suggested individual members should avoid involvement in academics

(Note: Some respondents gave multiple types of answers, so totals exceed 100.)

Thematic Analysis with Examples

1. Ask Questions and Stay Informed (42 responses)

This was the **most common theme**, with board members describing a role focused on **inquiry**, **monitoring**, **and understanding**, without stepping into administrative decision-making.

"The main role is to ask questions so they have a comfort level and they feel they know what is going on."

— February interview

"Board members should ask questions, review data, and be educated enough to evaluate the superintendent's plan."

- March interview

2. Serve as a Community Liaison or Ambassador (25 responses)

Many respondents view their individual responsibility as **bridging communication** between the district and the public. These members help explain decisions, gather community input, and promote trust in the system.

"My job is to be the liaison/ambassador of the school for the community."

— March interview

"Be a conduit between the community and the district. Help translate what's happening in schools into something parents can engage with."

— March interview

3. Support Without Micromanaging (22 responses)

These respondents emphasized the importance of **deferring to experts**, trusting school leadership, and not stepping beyond policy-level discussions.

"We are not the professionals... ask questions and digest information before we vote."

— May interview

"We should not be interfering with testing, curriculum, or instructional materials."

— February interview

4. Advocate for Accountability (18 responses)

These members believe board members **must ensure progress** and are obligated to hold administrators responsible for student achievement.

"If the kids are not progressing, the superintendent is not effective."

— March interview

"They have an obligation to push their administration to improve or maintain the excellence that is seen."

- April interview

5. Acknowledge Limits of Individual Authority (16 responses)

Respondents in this group stressed that one board member alone has **limited ability to impact academics**, and real influence occurs only through the **collective action** of the full board.

"Individually, I don't think we play too much of a role—things have to be done collectively."

- March interview

"You shouldn't try to [impact achievement] as an individual."

— February interview

6. Advocate Minimal Involvement (10 responses)

A minority explicitly said that individual members **should not** be involved in academic issues at all, citing risk of overreach or inappropriate pressure on staff.

- "There's no way to do this individually, too big of a district."
- March interview

"Board members need to stay out of instructional territory entirely."

- April interview

Takeaways

- The dominant model for individual board member behavior is strategic inquiry without interference.
- Most members believe their **power is collective**, and individual efforts should stay within the boundaries of governance, not operations.
- Respondents often balance two ideas: staying informed and curious, while resisting the
 urge to act independently or overstep roles.
- A small but notable group believes individual members have a duty to challenge or push administrators when results lag.
- **Community engagement** is seen as an important—but often underutilized—part of the individual member's role.

Conclusion

School board members across districts largely agree that their **individual roles** should be governed by **restraint**, **curiosity**, **and clarity of purpose**. They see themselves as information-seekers, accountability partners, and communication bridges—but not instructional experts. While a few view themselves as advocates who must challenge the status quo, most emphasize that their true influence lies in **working with fellow board members**, not acting alone.

The overall responsibilities of school boards for academic outcomes

Responses to: "What role should the school board as a whole play when it comes to academic outcomes?"

Overview

In Ballotpedia's Virtual School Board Listening Tour, board members were asked to reflect on the **collective role of the school board** in shaping and influencing academic outcomes. This question elicited responses reflecting a variety of governance perspectives.

Many board members emphasized that while the board should not manage instruction directly, it plays a **critical oversight role**—setting academic goals, monitoring performance, and holding the superintendent accountable. Others highlighted the board's role in **resource allocation**, **community alignment**, and **strategic visioning**. Though styles and emphasis varied, most respondents clearly viewed academic outcomes as squarely within the board's responsibility, albeit at a **governance**—not operational—level.

Statistical Summary

Out of 100 responses:

Response Type	Number of Respondents	
Set goals / establish vision and priorities	39	
Hold superintendent and system accountable for student achievement	36	

Monitor performance / use data to assess progress	28
Approve curriculum / oversee budget impacting instruction	22
Avoid micromanagement / stay out of instructional decisions	20
Engage with community / represent academic expectations	11
Expressed lack of board influence due to outside control or dysfunction	7

Note: Responses often reflected more than one theme.

Thematic Analysis with Examples

1. Setting Academic Vision and Goals (39 responses)

This was the most common theme. Respondents said the board's job is to **establish direction**, set measurable objectives, and clearly define what success looks like for the district.

"Everything—make sure it falls within your vision and goals. Keep the superintendent accountable. Giving feedback to see how they're coming along." — February interview

"Partner with the superintendent and their team in order to build goals that push forward those initiatives."

— April interview

2. Accountability for Results (36 responses)

Respondents described a strong oversight role: **holding the superintendent accountable** for progress on student achievement and ensuring policies lead to results.

"School board should set the bar. If we don't push and make sure we're doing everything correctly, the principal or superintendent won't."

— February interview

"We need to make sure the district is meeting its goals. If they aren't, the board has to ask why."

— March interview

3. Monitoring Progress with Data (28 responses)

Many mentioned using **data dashboards**, **testing benchmarks**, **and score reports** to track academic performance and ask questions to spur improvement.

"Our job is to use the data we are presented with to ask: Are we moving the needle for students?"

- March interview

"We should be constantly reviewing academic data and tying our conversations back to student performance."

- May interview

4. Approving Curriculum and Budget (22 responses)

Respondents said the board influences academic outcomes through its **budgeting and curriculum approval powers**, deciding where to allocate resources and which materials or policies are in place.

"Our responsibility is to determine what budget is and where funds should go. Changes to curriculum—do we change it?"

- March interview

"We review and approve curriculum and ensure that it aligns with district goals."

- April interview

5. Avoiding Micromanagement (20 responses)

Many emphasized that the board must **stay out of daily instructional decisions** and focus instead on high-level strategy and evaluation.

"We should hold them accountable, but I don't want board members to get in the weeds about whether tests are appropriate—that's not our job."

— February interview

"We're not here to write lesson plans—we're here to make sure our expectations are clear."

— November interview

6. Community Engagement and Academic Advocacy (11 responses)

A smaller group emphasized the board's job to ensure that **the community's academic priorities are reflected** in school operations and to **communicate about student success** with stakeholders.

"The board should communicate outcomes and progress to the public. That's part of trust-building."

- March interview

"Our role is to ensure that the public understands our goals, and that those goals are being met."

- April interview

7. Perceived Lack of Influence or Structural Barriers (7 responses)

A handful of board members expressed skepticism about the board's real power over academics, especially in districts where control is centralized elsewhere.

"They have no input on academics, do not receive data, and no forum to discuss on a regular basis."

- March interview

"In practice, we aren't given access to enough data to know whether our work is making a difference."

- September interview

Takeaways

- The vast majority of board members believe the school board must play an active role in shaping academic direction, though not managing instruction directly.
- The most frequently cited responsibilities are **setting academic goals**, **reviewing performance data**, and **holding the superintendent accountable**.
- Boards are expected to approve curriculum and budgets with an eye toward student outcomes.
- At the same time, members widely acknowledge the need to avoid micromanagement.
- A small but important subset of responses revealed structural challenges, where boards are sidelined from academic conversations or decision-making.

Conclusion

School board members overwhelmingly view academic outcomes as a **core part of their governance role**, even though they operate at a policy level. Their influence comes through **vision-setting**, **resource approval**, **and accountability**, not through direct management of instruction. While local context varies, most board members see themselves as **guardians of academic progress**—responsible for ensuring that district goals are ambitious, measurable, and met. In districts where this influence is diluted by external controls or poor access to data, board members often express frustration and seek greater transparency and alignment with district leadership.



Goals that individual school board members hope to achieve in their term of service

Overview

As part of Ballotpedia's Virtual School Board Listening Tour, school board members were asked: "What are two or three goals you have for the district or the board?"

This open-ended question prompted highly varied responses, but clear thematic patterns emerged. These ranged from improving academic outcomes and communication with the public to strengthening board cohesion, managing finances, and promoting student well-being.

This analysis groups those responses by category, highlights illustrative examples from across different interviews and months, and draws conclusions about what board members most often prioritize.

Top Goal Themes Identified

Category	Number of Mentions (approx.)
Academic outcomes & student achievement	30+
Community engagement & public trust	20+
Board governance & internal dynamics	15+
Financial oversight & resource management	15+

Mental health, equity, and school climate 10+

Innovation & unique local priorities 5+

1. Academic Improvement & Student Success

The most frequently cited goal was improving academic performance. Board members framed this in a variety of ways, including:

- Raising test scores and graduation rates
- Closing achievement gaps
- Improving curriculum and instructional quality
- Increasing college and career readiness

"We want to reduce discipline cases, improve our graduation rates, and increase the number of students pursuing college or workforce training."

— August interview

"I want to push for more AP courses and languages at the high school level. It's not just about passing rates—it's about giving kids opportunities."

- July interview

"We just moved to a four-day school week. My goal is to carefully monitor the academic and mental health impact."

— February interview

"I want to create a consistent, standards-aligned curriculum and make sure we're using data well to identify gaps."

- March interview

2. Community Engagement & Public Understanding

Many members stressed the need to increase transparency, improve communication with the public, and rebuild trust.

- Making board members more visible and accessible
- Hosting community forums or coffee chats
- Involving students and families in decision-making
- Increasing media and public understanding of board work

"We need to de-mystify the board. People don't understand what we actually do."

- April interview

"My goal is to grow community communication—get volunteers, senior citizens, and students engaged."

— March interview

"I want to create a system for student voice—maybe a student advisory group that meets with the board."

— March interview

3. Strengthening Board Governance & Culture

Another frequently cited goal was improving the board's own functioning. Respondents described internal dysfunction, lack of cohesion, or the need for more informed or representative leadership.

- Fostering collaboration and mutual respect
- Recruiting new, diverse members
- Clarifying governance roles
- Planning for leadership succession

"I want to help develop a leadership pipeline. We need new voices and better preparation for board service."

— April interview

"We need to become a more unified board—too much mistrust and factionalism right now."

- April interview

"We're working on improving how we work together as a board and how we interact with staff."

- May interview

4. Financial Oversight & Resource Management

Several board members set goals focused on managing school resources more effectively.

- Hiring competent administrators for finance and HR
- Making strategic budget cuts when necessary
- Increasing transparency around spending

"We need to hire a new business manager and get a long-term superintendent in place. Right now, we're just treading water."

- April interview

"We have to balance academic goals with what the state will actually fund. We can't build castles in the air."

— March interview

"My focus is on ensuring budget transparency and avoiding wasteful projects."

- August interview

5. Wellness and School Climate

Several respondents mentioned student well-being and social issues as primary concerns.

Addressing mental health concerns

- Supporting student belonging and identity
- Addressing racism and discipline disparities
- Creating inclusive policies and equity councils

"I want to make sure every child feels safe and supported, regardless of background."

— February interview

"We're developing an equity and belonging committee to guide our work across schools."

- March interview

"The four-day week brings mental health concerns we need to monitor carefully."

— February interview

6. Innovation and Special Projects

A small number of board members focused on distinctive goals or pilot programs.

"I want to replace traditional homework with educational video games."

— August interview

"I'm pushing for global curricula and foreign exchange opportunities."

- July interview

Key Takeaways

- Academic goals remain a central priority, but many board members frame these goals through the lens of equity, mental health, or instructional quality.
- A significant number of members are working to **rebuild trust** with the public through increased transparency, communication, and board accessibility.
- Board function and leadership are seen as critical to district success, especially in boards experiencing political division or turnover.

- Many boards are dealing with staffing and finance instability, and set goals aimed at stabilizing operations before focusing on growth.
- Some members are using their platform to push for **bold or creative ideas**, from alternative scheduling to culturally responsive curricula.

Conclusion

When asked to reflect on their goals, school board members emphasized both **foundational responsibilities**—like improving academics and managing budgets—and **forward-looking aspirations** like community building, wellness, and innovation. Their responses reflect a desire to not only raise student outcomes but to **reshape how the public engages with and understands the work of the board** itself. Across districts, there is a consistent call for **trust**, **alignment**, **and transparency**—as well as recognition that local boards face complex challenges requiring long-term strategic thinking.

Dynamics between board, board members, and superintendents

Overview

This analysis explores responses to the question: "Are the board and superintendent partners, or is there a lack of partnership/competing visions?"

Interviewees rated the relationship on a scale of 1 to 5:

- 1 = Strong partnership
- 5 = Major conflict or misalignment

We analyzed 100 responses from school board members across 33 states, using their numeric ratings, elaborated explanations, and interview context to understand the nature and dynamics of board–superintendent relationships.

Statistical Summary

- Strong partnership (Ratings 1–2): 41 responses
- Moderate/uncertain (Rating 3): 16 responses
- Competing visions/lack of partnership (Ratings 4–5): 43 responses
- Total responses: 100
- Average rating: 3.07

This suggests that, overall, board-superintendent relationships are seen as **slightly strained**, with a wide range of experiences from full alignment to deep dysfunction.

Types of Responses and Key Themes

Type 1: Strong Partnership (Rating 1–2)

These board members described collaborative, aligned relationships grounded in trust, communication, and role clarity.

October Quote:

"1 – We are partners with the superintendent... board hires, superintendent carries out daily work."

November Quote:

"2 — [There is] a real effort to work together; everyone's learning how to navigate."

Common traits:

- Clear distinction between governance and management
- Established communication protocols
- Regular evaluations and alignment-building activities
- Shared mission and priorities

Type 2: Moderate or Conditional Partnership (Rating 3)

These respondents described relationships that were functional but uneven, often depending on personalities, politics, or changing dynamics.

May Quote:

"3 - True in theory. But there are competing visions."

September Quote:

"3 – We attempt to be partners but the board sees itself as managing partner. Not equal."

Common traits:

- Some members are aligned while others are not
- Relationship shifts with board turnover
- Confusion or disagreement about governance roles
- Attempts at partnership that lack full execution

Type 3: Competing Visions / Lack of Partnership (Rating 4–5)

These school board members cited serious governance dysfunction, ranging from distrust to open conflict, lack of input, or political interference.

February Quote:

"5 – Superintendent is in control. Board members think their job is just to rubber stamp."

July Quote:

"5 – [There is a] competing vision, and it's not working."

March Quote:

"5 – Lack of partnership, mayor runs the show from behind the scenes."

April Quote:

"4 - Superintendent doesn't want input. We're sidelined."

Common traits:

- Superintendent seen as dismissive of board input
- Board factions or political groups interfere with governance
- Mayor or external actors dominate strategic direction
- Board feels disempowered or misled



Observations and Patterns

- Polarization is high: A near-even split between collaborative (41%) and conflicting (43%) relationships suggests that board-superintendent dynamics are highly variable and context-driven.
- Politics often play a disruptive role: In urban or mayor-controlled districts, superintendents are sometimes perceived as accountable more to political actors than to the board.
- Training and governance structure matter: Respondents who rated the relationship positively often mentioned structured onboarding, governance workshops, or annual evaluations.
- **Unclear roles create tension:** Several board members mentioned that confusion between management vs. governance fuels mistrust or micromanagement.

Conclusion

The board-superintendent relationship is arguably the most critical factor in effective school governance. While many boards report successful collaboration, others face significant misalignment or political interference. The average rating of **3.07** underscores that **governance training**, **clearly defined roles**, **and trust-building mechanisms** are crucial to sustaining a functional partnership.

What school board members wish voters and the media understood about them

Overview

Across the 100 interviews conducted during the Virtual School Board Listening Tour, school board members were asked:

"If there was one thing that you wish either journalists or voters understood that they don't currently understand, what would that be?"

This question prompted some of the most reflective, candid responses in the entire series of interviews. While the exact content of answers varied, nearly every respondent shared the same underlying sentiment: **they feel misunderstood** — either by the public, the press, or both.

Board members want to be seen more clearly, evaluated more fairly, and engaged more meaningfully. From this rich dataset, three distinct response types emerged:

- 1. The Misunderstood Complexity Boards those who feel that the public and press underestimate how complicated the system is.
- 2. The Perception-Fighting Boards those frustrated by media narratives and misinformation.
- 3. The Local Involvement Advocates those wishing more voters would simply show up and engage.

Each of these types reveals a different facet of how school board members experience public scrutiny, public disengagement, or public misunderstanding.



Type 1: The Misunderstood Complexity Boards

Summary

Board members in this group expressed concern that both journalists and voters lack a clear understanding of how school systems work — especially when it comes to budgeting, governance roles, decision-making authority, and constraints imposed by state or federal policy. Their frustration stems from being blamed for decisions outside their control, or being expected to solve problems they aren't empowered to address.

Common Themes

- Districts don't control all the funding or policy decisions people assume they do.
- School governance is more nuanced than a "yes/no" vote or a party-line narrative.
- The media oversimplifies stories in ways that don't reflect operational reality.

Key Quotes

"People don't understand the budget process — they think we can just spend money however we want. But funding comes from the city or the state and is restricted."

- March interview

"Just how complicated of a system it is, the lack of control."

— November interview

"It's hard for anyone to understand the financial side, but it would be really helpful for them to understand that."

— February interview

Estimated Representation

Roughly 35–40% of respondents emphasized systemic misunderstanding as their top concern.



⚠ Type 2: The Perception-Fighting Boards

Summary

These respondents feel burned by bad press or frustrated with misinformation on social media and in public discourse. They see themselves and their boards doing meaningful work but believe that journalists often misrepresent them and voters only pay attention to outrage

headlines rather than outcomes. Some point to cultural debates or politicization as a wedge that prevents serious dialogue about student success.

Common Themes

- Local press covers conflict but not progress.
- Social media rumors and "culture war" narratives distort the facts.
- Board members are trying to stay focused on kids, not politics and want others to do the same.

Key Quotes

"Despite all the negative things written, we are really succeeding at a great level... If they would stop and take a deep breath and think critically about rumors... they could understand what's actually happening."

- March interview
- "That we're there for the kids. We're not there to start our political careers or become Fox media darlings."
- August interview
- "Social media makes up stuff that's going on in the schools, and people believe this stuff."
- March interview

Estimated Representation

Roughly 30–35% of respondents focused primarily on media narratives or misinformation as the issue they most want corrected.



Type 3: The Local Involvement Advocates

Summary

These board members were less focused on public misunderstanding and more concerned about public disengagement. They lamented low turnout at board meetings, low involvement in parent organizations, and low awareness of what boards actually do. For them, the greatest problem is not misinformation — it's **absence**. They want more voters and journalists to attend, listen, ask questions, and participate.

Common Themes

- Constituents don't know who their board members are or how decisions get made.
- Many people only show up when angry not to learn or contribute constructively.
- A better-informed electorate starts with showing up in person.

Key Quotes

"Be involved. You have to know all your kid's teachers, what the requirements are. And please please go to school board meetings."

- October interview
- "They should take advantage of parent groups and help them and get involved."
- March interview
- "I wish the public knew more about the comings and goings of the board."
- December interview

Estimated Representation

About **25–30%** of respondents prioritized **greater civic involvement** over improved perception or technical understanding.

Takeaways

- While the reasons vary, nearly every board member feels misunderstood in some way.
- The complexity group wants deeper understanding of school operations and roles.
- The perception-fighters want better coverage, less outrage, and more trust.

- The involvement advocates want more visibility, turnout, and consistent community presence.
- A unifying theme across all groups is a desire for empathy and engagement not applause or agreement, but informed participation.

Conclusion

School board members across the country are asking not for praise, but for **clarity**: clarity of understanding, clarity of narrative, and clarity of connection with their communities. The question of what journalists and voters misunderstand most revealed not just frustration, but aspiration — a hope that civic dialogue can move past blame and toward solutions.

Whether board members are frustrated by **misattributed authority**, **media distortion**, or **civic disengagement**, the message is the same: public education deserves more informed, present, and thoughtful partners. If the public wants boards to be better, board members are asking them to first **show up**, **listen**, and **learn**.

Overview: School boards come in three flavors

Based on insights drawn from all 100 interviews in the Virtual School Board Listening Tour, school boards across the country can largely be categorized into three distinct types. These categories reflect not only differences in governance and board member dynamics, but also the degree to which boards prioritize academic outcomes and community engagement. Below is a breakdown of each type, including statistical patterns, defining characteristics, illustrative quotes, and major takeaways.

Type 1: Cohesive and Functional Boards ("Collaborative Leadership Boards")

Overview

These boards function with high trust, shared vision, and well-defined roles. Members respect each other's perspectives and collaborate productively with the superintendent. There is often a strong sense of purpose centered on improving student outcomes, with an emphasis on strategy rather than micromanagement.

Statistical Patterns

- Conflict scores: Low (Q22–Q23 average = 1–2)
- Board understanding of roles: High (Q30 = 4–5)
- Partnership with superintendent: Strong (Q31 = 1)
- Decision-making unity: High post-vote support (Q29 = 4–5)
- Academic awareness: High visibility into outcomes and reports

Common Traits

- Regular and meaningful academic reporting
- Clear boundaries between board and superintendent roles
- High levels of optimism about achieving board goals
- Mutual respect and trust among board members

Illustrative Quotes

"We get monthly reports, quarterly deep dives, and have direct access to curriculum leaders. You can be as informed as you want to be."

- August interview

"Everyone knows everyone's positions before they vote. We are all open and trust each other."

October interview

Takeaways

- This type of board is rare but offers a clear model of strong governance.
- Their effectiveness is built on systems of communication, shared values, and data-informed decision-making.
- Trust allows for healthy dissent without dysfunction.

Type 2: Divided and Dysfunctional Boards ("Coalition-Driven Conflict Boards")

Overview

These boards experience chronic division, often along political, racial, or ideological lines. Coalitions are rigid, and votes consistently fall along predictable factions. Members report feelings of exclusion, mistrust, and personal animosity. Conflicts linger without true resolution, and decisions often feel predetermined.

Statistical Patterns

- Conflict scores: High (Q22–Q23 = 4–5)
- Coalitions: Predictable and entrenched (Q24–Q25 = 5)
- Resolution of disputes: Low or performative (Q26–Q27 = 1–3)
- Trust, openness, and collaboration: Low (Q49–Q53 = 1–2)

Common Traits

- Political divisions dominate board behavior
- "Odd man out" dynamics, with some members consistently outvoted
- Conflict resurfaces during negotiations and key decisions
- Board accountability and willingness to admit fault are minimal

Illustrative Quotes

- "They are all rubber stampers for the superintendent. I'm always the only 'no' vote."
- August interview
- "Every major vote is 4–3. Conflicts don't resolve—they just fester."
- September interview
- "People don't trust each other or admit when they're wrong. There's no real partnership."
- May interview

Takeaways

- Deep ideological divisions paralyze collaboration and long-term planning.
- The presence of coalitions fosters predictability but undermines critical thinking.

 These boards risk poor public trust, high superintendent turnover, and politicization of education.

Type 3: Passive or Detached Boards ("Hands-Off Oversight Boards")

Overview

Boards in this category adopt a highly deferential stance toward the superintendent and district staff. While not overtly divided or dysfunctional, they remain largely uninvolved in the daily workings or academic oversight of the district. They often express a 10,000-foot view philosophy, focusing only on broad policy decisions.

Statistical Patterns

- Conflict scores: Low to moderate (Q22 = 2-3)
- Role understanding: Mixed (Q30 = 3–4)
- Academic oversight: Minimal engagement (Q32–Q34 = 1–3)
- Accountability/self-reflection: Varies widely

Common Traits

- Delegation of nearly all responsibilities to superintendent
- Little to no involvement in program evaluation or student outcomes
- Board meetings are largely reactive, not proactive
- Some board members express regret at how little influence they feel they have

Illustrative Quotes

"We're in the helicopter—we're not the ones going up and down. We're at 10,000 feet."

- April interview

"We don't meddle, but we like to know what's going on."

— February interview

"The superintendent evaluates programs and we just approve or monitor."

— October interview

Takeaways

- This governance model avoids micromanagement but risks disengagement.
- Without robust oversight, academic performance and public trust can stagnate.
- These boards may need clearer definitions of their strategic role to be effective partners in education.

Percentages of SBMs in Each Type of Board

Type 1: Cohesive and Functional Boards

("Collaborative Leadership Boards")

✓ Estimated: 28% of interviewees

These board members described their boards as:

- Collegial and respectful, even when in disagreement
- Focused on student outcomes and strategic planning
- In alignment (or constructive collaboration) with their superintendent
- Transparent, data-driven, and high-trust environments

Type 2: Divided and Dysfunctional Boards

("Coalition-Driven Conflict Boards")

↑ Estimated: 38% of interviewees



These board members reported:

- Persistent voting blocs or ideological divides
- High rates of personalization and unresolved conflict
- Friction with the superintendent or internal factions
- A sense of burnout, gridlock, or board infighting

Type 3: Passive or Detached Boards

("Hands-Off Oversight Boards")

Estimated: 34% of interviewees

These board members characterized their boards as:

- Minimally engaged in academic oversight
- Focused on big-picture governance but not instructional detail
- Highly deferential to the superintendent and staff
- Lacking robust internal dialogue or public accountability systems

✓ Summary Table

School Board Type % of Approx. # of SBMs Respondents

Cohesive and Functional Boards 28% 28



Divided and Dysfunctional 38% 38

Boards

Passive or Detached Boards 34% 34

These percentages reflect patterns in how board members described their team culture, conflict resolution, academic engagement, and board-superintendent dynamics across multiple questions and themes — not a single binary question.

Conclusion

Across the 100 interviews, these three types of boards surfaced repeatedly, revealing not only how governance structures differ, but how deeply those differences affect a district's performance, morale, and community trust. While no board is perfect, understanding these typologies offers a blueprint for identifying strengths and weaknesses.

Functional boards prioritize collaboration and learning outcomes, **divided boards** often battle over ideology at the expense of progress, and **passive boards** risk becoming irrelevant by relinquishing oversight.

Each board's structure, membership, and political environment will shape where it falls—but with the right interventions, even fractured or passive boards can move toward a more collaborative and student-focused future.



Notes on the study

Ballotpedia staffers interviewed 100 elected public school board members in 2024-2025. The first interview took place on June 3, 2024, and the final interview took place on May 29, 2025.

25 Ballotpedia staffers helped conduct the hour-long interviews, and asked these questions.

The school board members who participated were not scientifically selected to statistically represent the various kinds of school board members. The school board members who were interviewed signed up for an interview after reading about Ballotpedia's Virtual School Board Listening Tour in Ballotpedia's Hall Pass, a weekly e-newsletter for school board members across the country. Every school board member who registered was interviewed, and all interviews were incorporated into the final analysis.

Across the country, there are roughly 13,500 public school districts governed by roughly 83,000 school board members.

Since the interviewed school board members were promised anonymity, we are not sharing their names here. However, we thank each and every one of them. A number of Ballotpedia staffers who conducted interviews expressed a sense of warm connection with the board members they interviewed, and several noted that this sometimes included crying. We especially thank our interviewed board members for being so candid and open.

We can thank our staffers by name who conducted at least one interview. Thank you to Abbey Smith, Abby Campbell, Alison Graves, Briana Ryan, Carley Allensworth, Daniel Anderson, Dillon Redmond, Emma Burlingame, Erica Shumaker, Geoff Pallay, Glorie Martinez, Hannah Nelson, Janie Valentine, Kaley Platek, Ken Carbullido, Lara Bonatesta, Leslie Graves, Maddy Salucka, Marielle Bricker, Matt Latourelle, Meghann Olshefski, Myj Saintyl, Nathaniel Harwood, Sarah Groat, and Thomas Ellis.

Ballotpedia's School Board Listening Tour will help us provide better and more meaningful coverage of school boards, school board elections, and school board candidates as we gradually expand to cover each and every one of these vital elections and officeholders.

If you have questions about this work, please contact Caroline Presnell at caroline.presnell@ballotpedia.org