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Political Turmoil and Successful Schools

Politics and fiscal decisions rarely align in the best interest of all children

By William Flora and Ronald Kolenbrander

Across the nation, political turmoil stresses educational leaders who are trying to provide excellent opportunities for students. Whether it's a debate between taxpayers and the school board in a Midwestern community or fiscal haggling between the same groups in a small New Jersey district, politics and fiscal decisions rarely align in the best interest of all children.

As professors at Radford University in Virginia, we examined the contentious relationship between a school district and the board of supervisors in a nearby county. The relationship is so fractured that a state auditor recently stated, "Following a financial audit of the county and schools fiscal practices, members of the audit team who have been professionally involved in school-agency relations for over 35 years commented that they had never seen such hostility, acrimony, and ill will between two elected boards."

This type of conflict exists between boards and constituent groups across the nation. From Florida, where elected superintendents answer to political groups, to California, where referendums often drive fiscal debate, local squabbling over politics and money are a constant issue in public schools.

Despite 14 years of contentious community politics and continually contested local funding, the district we examined embodies some of the nation's best educational practices. Let's see how they did it.

Two boards, many differences

Virginia, unlike many states, has two boards that have different administrative authority at the local level. The county board of supervisors (or commissioners) has fiscal authority and approves the school district's budget. The school board is directly responsible for policy and line-item supervision of the budget. A central conflict between these boards occurs because the school board can only spend money formally allocated by the board of supervisors.

In the county we examined, the board of supervisors consists of individuals whose families have lived in the area for generations. They have comfortable lifestyles and have no need to venture beyond the immediate region. Moreover, the majority of this group is not a product of public schooling, nor were their children. This has led to a "plantation mentality" that believes all children should not be educated equally.

The school board has five members, all with children in the system and all working at or with experience from national or international companies. Collectively, the school board is younger and has far more formal education than the board of supervisors.

As the school district's superintendent said, "A knowledge economy demands that all people have a high level of education because the future is robots cleaning the house or a cleaning service that charges \$30 to \$40 an hour. The new economy is not a world where a few wealthy landowners are served by a majority of unskilled labor. The new economy is about knowledge. It

is a world where innovation and creativity, rooted in knowledge, produces a framework for employment.”

Elected superintendents may face constituents who believe that election to office begets favor, not the responsibility of providing a quality education for all children. Thus, a newly elected superintendent in a central Florida school district faces the daunting task of working with constituent groups interested only in assuring high quality educational experiences for gifted, high performing students

Whether it is a board of supervisors or taxpayers' agendas, elected and appointed superintendents face tough political struggles. It is a wonder that today's superintendents survive even for the brief national average of just over two years in their positions.

World views and local authority

The essence of the clash in this county, and in many other school divisions across the nation, is that two groups of local leaders have different views of the world and different levels of authority. Funding is a constant battle, and the percentage of local money given to schools has declined for the past decade. Schools are overcrowded, with 20 percent of the student population housed in trailers.

“I think what it really comes down to is we play it out at the extreme level in this county,” said the superintendent, who declined to be named for this article in exchange for his candor. “It’s not that different from what may be found across the Commonwealth of Virginia or, across the nation for that matter. ... What you find in a lot of localities is this opposition between the school board and the board of supervisors or whatever group it is that controls the money.”

The supervisors' tight purse strings extend beyond education into other public services, such as parks and recreation, social services, and public safety, the superintendent said. “They believe very much that you earn it yourself and that’s the way it should be. Then you have the school board who believes very strongly that every child should learn at high levels.”

The difference in mindset is exemplified when the two boards describe “adequate” space for student learning. There has been a five-year debate about the need for a new high school building and what it should look like. The school board talks in terms of high tech buildings and space designed for learning. The board of supervisors argue that space is space and instruction could be conducted perfectly well in a barn. The school board describes teachers as facilitators and diagnosticians. The board of supervisors thinks teachers own knowledge, keep the rows of desks straight, and impart their expertise.

Moreover, the board of supervisors seems to believe that administrators are still the keepers of the keys. They have a 1950s perception in a 21st century world. Prophetic thinking is lost on those who look at the world through the rearview window. It is so unfortunate that the recipe in this school system is not one of shared vision and belief in the future.

Clearly, this juxtaposition in world perspectives sets the stage for extremely challenging politics. This county is not fiscally strapped; it is among the top 15 percent in mean income in Virginia. It has the local ability to support education at levels well above the state average.

This same juxtaposition could be found in governing group politics in areas where haves and have-nots define a community.

Success despite disputes

Despite political disputes and poor funding, the school board, superintendent, teachers, and staff have worked since the early 1990s to significantly reform the district. "It doesn't matter how much money comes in, it is all about what we do in the schools," the superintendent said. "We started with our vision: All children can learn; all children will learn, and all will learn at high levels of achievement.

"We've done away with all gatekeeping, and created opportunities for all students to excel," the superintendent continued. "Internally within the schools we've opened up access and we've made everyone believers."

The culture of the school system focuses on every child. Open access exists for all students. Rich opportunities for learning are directly supported by the school board's goals, which set the stage for the system's success.

The goals are:

- **Goal 1:** All students will be prepared to complete the requirements for an Advanced Studies Diploma.
- **Goal 2:** All students will be on grade-level by second grade and demonstrate annual progress each subsequent year.
- **Goal 3:** All students will be engaged in activities which support character development and citizenship.
- **Goal 4:** All students will be scholar athletes participating in at least one athletic activity and/or one extracurricular activity each year in grades 6 to 12.

One key to the district's success has been the development of a strong education foundation that has provided substantial funding to supplement the lack of county-approved money. In 2005, foundation funds allowed the district to hire a science coordinator and an algebra teacher for the elementary schools. The foundation owns a building used for the district's alternative program and has led efforts for the donation of 71 acres to be used for the new high school.

The foundation board works together to ensure that funds are utilized to support the entire district and the school board's work. In many suburban areas, foundations have had difficulty achieving the clear focus to help all children and as a result, money is often used to provide for high-achieving schools or projects that support only a few students.

Without a focused commitment to all children and to the school system as a whole, foundations can actually become part of the fiscal tension. The reform effort in this Virginia school division has taken years of meticulous work to achieve a culture that focuses on all students achieving. It is a process that is still evolving.

Becoming an education leader

Regardless of the continued battle over funding, the school district is recognized as a leader in public education. It has been recognized by the *Washington Post* and the county high school was ranked among the top in the nation by *Newsweek* in 2006.

How did this happen? How can a school division that operates on substantially less local funding than surrounding counties be so widely recognized? It takes hard work, dedication, the use of data in making instructional decisions, and a focused effort to spend very limited resources where they make the most impact on student achievement.

Other accomplishments include:

- The number of teachers with advanced degrees has more than doubled since 1986. Nearly 50 percent of all teachers now have master's degrees.
- The dropout rate declined from 4 percent in 1990 to less than 1 percent in 2005.
- 90 percent of the current high school senior class is enrolled in at least one International Baccalaureate (IB) course.
- 98 percent of all elementary students are reading on grade level by second grade.
- 9 percent of fifth-grade students begin algebra. By eighth grade, 100 percent of students are enrolled in Algebra or Geometry or have completed Algebra.
- 100 percent of students enrolled in grades 5, 8, and 12 are actively involved in community service work.

It has not been simple, nor has it taken an insignificant effort to reach this level of success. The staff and school board share an unshakeable belief in the success of all children. The board's goals are central to the district's mission and vision. The school board works tirelessly to support the goals and work within the system.

Success is not an accident. This model can be replicated in any community where fiscal debate negatively impacts student access to quality educational opportunities and services. The difficult piece is that it takes work, dedication, and a desire to do all that can be done for student learning.

Across America, public schools are at the center of continual debate. This is something that will probably never end. Local boards, especially in places where educational opportunities are exceptional, should work together to prepare children for the future while building a more productive community. Just imagine where this school district and others like it across America might be if an environment existed where local governing bodies, community groups, and professional educators shared the same recipe for the future.

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