

# ■ YOUR TURN

Your chance to tell us what you think

## YOU SAY

### School boards are doing OK

**S**chools boards are doing OK, you said in response to March's question. And if that doesn't sound like a ringing endorsement, consider that with all the calamities befalling other governing bodies—from those running Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, to the brain trusts of Lehman Brothers and Merrill Lynch—a little humility might not be so bad.

To the question, "How are school boards doing?" Forty-three percent of you agreed with Response B: "On average, school boards do no better or worse than most other governmental bodies when it comes to maintaining focus and avoiding unnecessary conflicts."

"The vast majority of school boards perform their jobs well and make a genuine effort to focus on high educational

goals and objectives," says Patrick Francomano, a school committee member from Massachusetts. "Boards are still vulnerable, however, to misdirection and personal conflicts which can only be overcome by ongoing professional development and the administrative team's support and collaboration."

Another 26 percent of you said school boards do their jobs "exceptionally," 22 percent said they could use a lot of improvement, and 9 percent answered "none of the above."

More comments:

■ People are people. Some are mostly good and some are not. Because they are imperfect humans, even those with the best of intentions make mistakes. I think most people who serve the public have

good intentions, but most people need to be reminded from time to time of the standard we should all strive for.—Karen Hopkins, board member, Georgia

■ The difference between school boards and most other governmental bodies is one thing: constituents. If elected board members wish to keep their positions, they may choose to acquiesce to the wishes of the vocal minorities in their districts, all too often at the expense of what is best for all. If anything kills dynamic interaction and continuous improvement, it's personal agendas.—Linda L. McBride, board member, Virginia

■ School boards generally perform quite admirably. They are the level of government closest to those who elect them, and, in the best examples, they act as apolitical bodies that put the best interest of the students and the community at the forefront.—Mike Ford, superintendent, New York state

■ Most school boards are driven by special interests and personal agendas. That is not necessarily bad. When those interests relate to maximizing student learning, then you likely have a high-functioning board working hard to improve their community. But when board mem-

## WE ASK

### Are schools safer now?

On page 16 of Managing Editor Kathleen Vail's report on the 10-year anniversary of the Columbine shootings, former public information officer Rick Kaufman describes the moment he truly realized what was happening.

"Once we saw the reality of it, it was like a cold splash of water," Kaufman says. "It's for real, no prank. The things we had feared were coming true. This is happening to us."

In the months that followed, the tragedy in Littleton, Colo., became real for school districts across the country as well. They realized that what happened at Columbine High School could happen anywhere—at any school, in any district. They vowed to beef up school security, to keep a better

eye on alienated and potentially violent students, and to make schools as safe as they could possibly be.

Have they—have we—succeeded? Are the nation's schools safer than they were 10 years ago? How about the schools in your district?

As always, please choose a response from those listed below, and e-mail it, along with your comments, to [yourturn@asbj.com](mailto:yourturn@asbj.com). We'll report the results in July.

A. Yes, schools are safer than they were at the time of the Columbine shootings. (Please elaborate.)

B. Schools are about as safe now as they were then.

C. No, schools are less safe than they were 10 years ago.

D. None of the above.

**About the Your Turn survey:** These responses represent the views of the ASBJ Reader Panel, a self-selected sample of subscribers, plus other readers who choose to participate by postal mail, e-mail, or online at [www.asbj.com](http://www.asbj.com). The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of *American School Board Journal* or of its publisher, the National School Boards Association. **Join the panel at [www.asbj.com/readerpanel](http://www.asbj.com/readerpanel).**

bers have less altruistic motives driven by ego, politics, and other issues, things tend to become divisive and counterproductive, and the board becomes ineffective.—Bob Ziegler, board member, Wisconsin

■ Most school boards do their work with a focus on what's best for students. Dysfunctional boards are often populated with individuals that have alternative agendas that are not focused on the classroom, or they mistake what their true role (policy, financial stewardship, and strategic planning) in the aggregate process really is (or should be).—Robert Lawrence, board member, Michigan

■ Our Davenport board members are passionate about taking action to improve student achievement. They hold our administrative leaders and teachers accountable for new programs, initiatives, innovations, and budget management. They read volumes of materials each weekend before making decisions. Discussion at the board table is active and engaging. They are very respectful of the opinion of others but feel free to disagree or present a different side to a concern. ... They are good policymakers, faithfully attend meetings, and are willing to talk with people about concerns for our district. They question how our dollars are spent and work toward being equitable and just in their decisions. I couldn't work for a better group of individuals. Our board members do all this work without pay because they so strongly believe in making our community the best it can be, and they know the powerful force education plays in success.—Linda Smith Kortemeyer, board secretary, Iowa

## LETTERS

### Education needs to be at the forefront of any talk about the future

America may be at one of the most critical crossroads in our history. And education just may be the most important key in deciding where we go as a country and as a people.

It's time for a real national debate on education—especially elementary and secondary education. What do we see as the purpose for schools? What are our goals for students? What are the best ways to achieve these goals? Who should decide what the goals of schooling should be? How can we better use the U.S. Department of Education to achieve the kind of excellent schools we want for our children and grandchildren? What have we been doing to improve education over the past 40 years and how is it working? How can we think “outside the box” to make schooling better for the future?

How do we start this debate? One place we can start is in the pages of *American School Board Journal*, and then launching it into mainstream publications and roundtables throughout the country. Who should be involved in this debate? I think all of the following: teachers, students, administrators, school boards, parents, grandparents, business leaders, professors, and college/university presidents.

There may be others that need to be involved but this debate is critical and the time is now. We have spent much of the last 40 years passing more and more legislation demanding more and more testing and tougher standards. We need to know how effective these changes have been and what might work better.

We can't let tradition or bureaucracy get in the way of making the right kinds of decisions for our educational future. If America is going to come out of this crisis on top then achieving the best education possible for our young people may be the most important step in that recovery. Tomorrow may be too late. Let's get started today. ■

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