Democracy For What and For Whom?: The Possibilities and Challenges of K-12 School Boards

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Local school boards have historically played a major role in the functioning and character of US schools, providing fiscal oversight, shaping policy, and creating avenues for community voice, representation, and accountability. As such, school boards have regularly served as critical sites for political struggle and public discourse on a range of issues. Yet growing demands on schools, political extremism, and well-coordinated attacks on public education are testing the capacity, legitimacy, and purpose of these democratic institutions. This qualitative, multiple case study of 10 California school board members examines the everyday realities of local school governance and how these realities speak to the possibilities of democracy in public education. Ultimately, our findings address under-examined questions about the nature of local democracy: for what and for whom? – democracy in service of maintaining the status quo or challenging it and advancing the needs of marginalized groups often left out of the process.

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Introduction

Political fracturing (Rogers et al., 2024), well-coordinated attacks on public education (Pappano, 2024), and growing demands on public school systems (Casserly, 2024), including to address deep-rooted injustices, are testing the capacity, legitimacy, and purpose of local school boards. These long-standing institutions have regularly served as critical sites for political struggle and public discourse on a range of issues (e.g., ethnic studies, school closures and mergers, and LGBTQ+ students' rights) (Walsh, 2024). Amidst a highly polarized environment, competing narratives have emerged in public discourse. Some have centered the problems plaguing school boards, calling into question their legitimacy and advocating for their elimination (Kogan, 2022; Smith, 2022;). Critics cite instances of disruptive board meetings, recall efforts, low voter turnout, uncontested races, vulnerability to capture by special interest or extremist groups, and a dearth of school board candidates. Others note the dissatisfaction of parents and community groups with boards' responses to COVID, curricular content debates, and the ongoing harms experienced by minoritized students in schools. Additional critics have argued that these institutions are largely failing to educate all students equitably, illustrating the limits of its democratic structures to advance justice. In turn, supporters of school boards have characterized school boards as necessary sites where democracy is practiced locally to address the education needs of the community. Their narratives condemn absolutist attacks on school boards and uplifts their value for public education and US democracy. Declaring "flaws aren't failures," various scholars maintain that school boards are a "work in progress" and "continue to play a vital role in serving children, communities, and democracy" (White et al., 2023b).

Yet, there remains limited research informing this debate and broader policy discussions around supporting or improving boards during this critical juncture. Past research generally centers the relationships between boards and other actors (e.g., superintendent) rather than the experiences and dialectic role of board members, and tends to favor quantitative methods—leaving considerable substantive and methodological gaps (Bridgeforth & White, 2025). The majority of current accounts fail to capture how this moment reflects a growing demand for advancing a participatory and multiracial democracy (Rogers et al., 2022) that furthers educational justice, such as new efforts to involve students in educational governance (Cai, 2021; Fletcher & King, 2014), increased diversity in board candidates, heightened calls for a reckoning with educational injustices, and greater awareness of the power of boards.

Moreover, some could argue local school boards provide opportunities for more participatory and deliberative forms of democracy, given the smaller scale in which they operate and the use of various practices such as public board meetings. Nevertheless, research indicates that the meeting structure and norms matter greatly (Collins, 2021; Marsh, 2007) and that these meetings are often sites of limited deliberation, superficial engagement, and systematic biases working against marginalized groups (Daramola et al., 2023; Sampson & Bertrand, 2022) – thus not always living up to these ideals.

This paper examines the everyday realities of school board governance and how these realities illustrate the possibilities of democracy in public education. Drawing on a qualitative, multiple case study of 10 school board members (SBMs) from California districts, we explore the following research questions:

1. *How do school board members conceptualize democracy and its purpose?*
2. *How do school board members enact or experience democracy in practice?*
3. *How do current socio-political conditions shape how school board members enact democracy at the local level?*

Grounding the Study

We ground the overall study in an historical understanding of school boards as evolving from small-scale governing bodies with considerable discretion over administering education to more complex "corporate-style" boards and political institutions that serve the demands and needs of multiple stakeholders and interests (Howell, 2005; Tyack, 1974; Wirt & Kirst, 2005). This literature positions boards as mediators of a complex set of actors and contexts with significant implications for the possibilities of a robust form of democratic governance.

School Boards as Sites of Local Democracy

Research depicts school board members as citizen-representatives tasked with upholding democratic ideals, allowing for collective decision-making and providing outlets for community concerns (Asen, 2015; Edelman, 1985). Unlike superintendents, few, if any, communities have educational, vocational, or certification requirements for board service, allowing for greater inclusion of citizens with differing backgrounds (Feuerstein, 2002; Land, 2002). The often uncompensated nature of board service, coupled with extensive time commitments, may also inhibit some citizens from serving (Hess, 2002). Relatedly, low voter turnout in board elections (Allen & Plank, 2005; Bartanen et al., 2018; Meier, 2002) also raises questions about board representativeness. Therefore, other mechanisms of involvement become important to ensuring representation and voice, particularly in times of conflict (Tracy & Durfy, 2007). As empirical research has confirmed that American voters broadly support local forms of school district governance (Alonso et. al., 2021), particularly when school boards offer deliberative, participatory forms of engagement, school board meetings, and the accompanying possibilities for public participation, can be invaluable opportunities for board members to better understand community stakeholders' perspectives around controversial issues (Collins, 2021).

School Boards Navigating Conflict(s)

School boards have a history of serving as epicenters of contentious debate and deliberation. Throughout the 20th century, school boards were regular litigants in court cases challenging racial segregation in schools (Fiss, 1971; Stephan, 2008) and have consistently navigated conflicts related to racial tensions (Kiang & Kaplan, 1994) and school closures and reconstitutions in marginalized communities (Daramola et al., 2023; Ewing, 2018). Several qualitative studies have demonstrated the limits of board meetings as deliberative spaces. Marsh (2007) revealed that language biases inhibited meaningful participation of minoritized community members in such meetings. Sampson and Bertrand (2020) and Daramola et al. (2023) found patterns of racialized censorship, with boards using meeting rules and policies to limit opportunities for Black parents and community members to advocate for their priorities. Nevertheless, O'Malley and Long's (2016) analysis of a school board's adoption of LGBTQ+-friendly policy offers a glimpse of the possibilities of meaningful board deliberations advancing educational justice, even within contentious sociopolitical contexts.

Theoretical Insights on Democracy and School Board Governance

We draw on democratic and critical theories to frame our understanding of the SBMs' ideals of democracy and board governance and the reality of how it plays out locally.

Figure 1: Models of Democracy
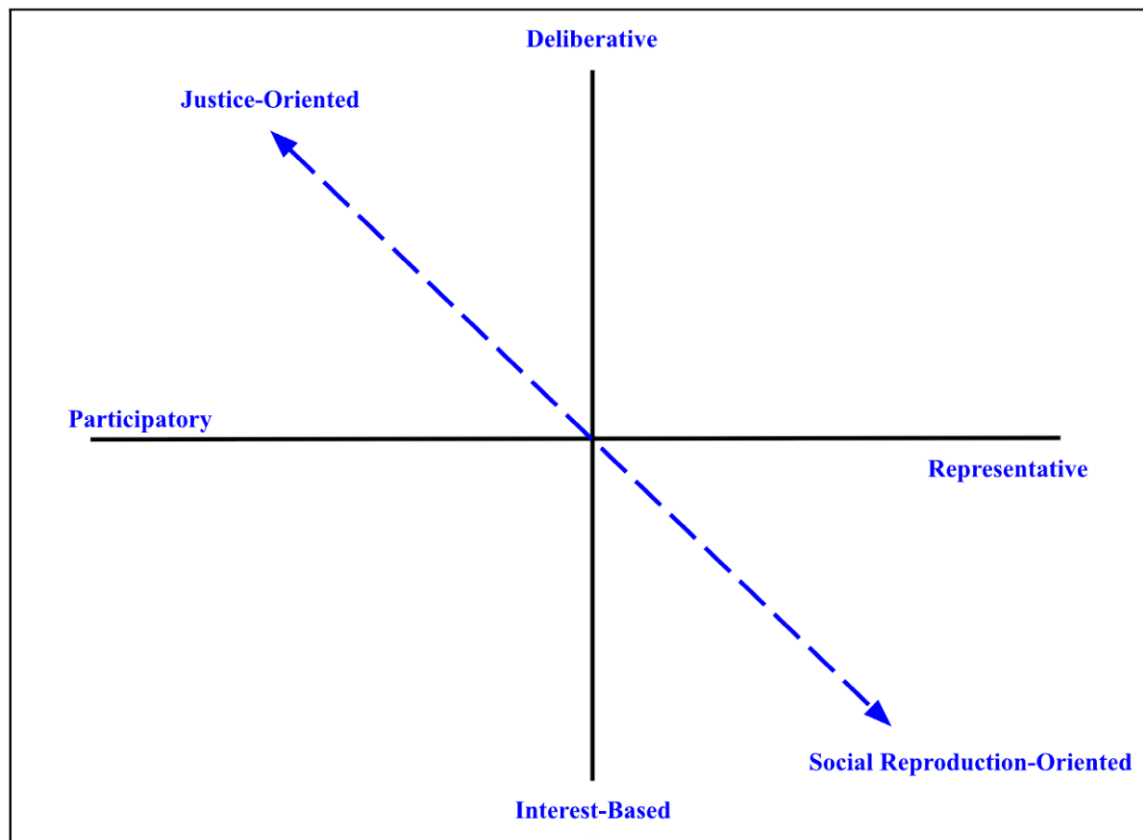
As Figure 1 illustrates, traditional models of democracy generally fall along two continua (Marsh, 2007). The first dimension (vertical arrow) relates to how democracy operates. A deliberative model involves public, reasoned discussions aimed at promoting the common good (Cohen, 1989; Elster, 1997). In contrast, an interest-based model rejects assumptions about the existence of a common good and asserts that individuals generally act on self-interest (Bessette, 1994; Schumpeter, 1942). Decisions are private and determined by competition for the promotion of private interests, usually in the form of voting (Mansbridge, 1983).

The second dimension (horizontal arrow in Figure 1) focuses on who is involved in democratic processes. A participatory model seeks to maximize involvement of those affected by

the decisions at hand (Dewey, 1927; Pateman, 1975). By involving those close to points of action, a participatory process can incorporate knowledge of how best to improve the situation, enhance participants' acceptance of and motivation to implement decisions, and increase the learning capacity of the system (Fung & Wright, 2001). We also root our understanding of participatory democracy in Ella Baker's commitments around empowerment of people at the grass roots, group-centered leadership, and direct action–all of which she argued were critical for a participatory democracy (Mueller, 2004). In contrast, in a representative model there is limited participation of a minority of leaders who represent the interests of their constituents. Given the limited capacity of "ordinary citizens," advocates of representation believe that a minority of leaders are needed to be active in politics and make informed decisions (Schumpeter, 1942). Dating back to the earliest formation of democracy in England and the United States, individuals have wrestled with tensions around the conception of representation: Should representatives use their own judgement to advance constituency interests, which may or may not align with constituency preferences (autonomy), or should representatives directly advocate for and accurately reflect the desires and opinions of their constituents (accountability) (Pitkin, 1969)?

While often described as ideal types, in practice democratic processes take on aspects of these four categories—and may oscillate along both the horizontal and vertical axes (Mansbridge, 1983). For example, a representative process can become more participatory by adding advisory bodies to inform the work of representatives. Much like other levels of government in the United States, school board governance historically operates as a representative and interest-based process with board members elected to represent their constituents' interests. Yet, variation is to be expected. In fact, research has documented ways in

which some boards operate in more participatory and deliberative ways – for example, in the small rural communities examined by Sutherland (2022).

Critical scholars have long argued that normative –often hegemonic– conceptions of deliberative democratic practice and publics for deliberation that do not consider power and that purport to bracket inequalities in status are themselves a strategy for social reproduction and to mask domination (Fraser, 1990). Similarly, what Fraser (1990) and other feminist scholars have criticized as the transformation of "I" into "we" can mask subtle forms of control, asking those deliberating to compromise, focus on the common good, and answer questions most relevant to elites (Collins, 2019), thus perpetuating inequality and undermining the needs and interests of marginalized individuals (Sanders, 1997; Young, 1997). To further frame our understanding of how individual board members negotiate and experience their roles in the current context, we borrow concepts from sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978; Lave & Wenger, 1991), which highlights how social and cultural factors shape the behaviors and identities of individuals, groups, and boards as institutions. This critical framework "aims to understand, reveal, and disrupt the mechanisms of oppression imposed by the established order, suturing the processes and aims of education to emancipatory goals" (Grande, 2004, p. 25).

Research Methods

This paper draws its findings from a qualitative, multiple case study of 10 school board members in California districts in 2023-24. Borrowing from critical ethnography (Castagno, 2012) and critical phenomenology (Guenther, 2019), this larger project centered individuals' perspectives and lived realities not as "objects" to be studied but as active, dialogic subjects who are interpreting, acting upon, and dynamically changing their worlds (Khasnabish & Haiven, 2014). Our multi-racial, multi-generational research team also attended to both micro and macro

phenomena, focused on various and intertwining power-related identities and oppressions, and reflected on issues of representation and positionality. Board members were purposefully sampled to capture variation in district size (small, medium, large) and local context (rural, suburban, urban), as well as background characteristics, including gender (5 female, 5 male), race/ethnicity (3 Latinx, 3 White, 1 East Asian, 1 West Asian, 1 multiracial), age (20s – 50s), experience on board (1 to 7 years), and occupation (Table 1). To maintain anonymity, we use pseudonyms throughout the paper.

<insert Table 1 here>

Data collection and analysis were iterative (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and each case included two, 60-90 minute interviews and five "audio diaries" allowing for "stream of consciousness thinking". Additional artifacts included media reports, board meeting transcripts, and relevant policy documents. All data sources were uploaded into Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software, and coded both inductively and deductively.

From the onset of this study, our research team was interested in the possibilities and challenges of enacting a more participatory, justice-oriented understanding of local democracy vis-à-vis school boards. As such, our interview protocol included several questions aimed at eliciting comprehensive understandings of how participants conceptualized democracy and enacted democratic practices. In the second semi-structured interview, we asked about the possibilities of board meetings as spaces for deliberation and decision-making. After asking board members to share their working definition of democracy, we also asked "How, if at all, does the work of a school board promote the goals of democracy you just described? Does it operate in the way you envision for local democracy?"

Our codebook, derived from our framework, included several codes related to democracy in order to capture how SBMs understood democracy, what democracy looked like in practice, their perceptions on the overall state of democracy, and how the school board represented that vision or purpose. After individually coding each of the interview transcripts, audio diaries, and meeting observation notes, our team met regularly over the course of one year for peer debriefing sessions contributing to an iterative data analysis process. We ultimately engaged in within-case thematic coding and cross-case analysis using Microsoft Excel to develop meta-matrices and theory-based data displays to identify patterns and interpret their implications for our continued research (Bush-Mecenas & Marsh, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Findings

RQ1: How do board members conceptualize democracy and its purpose?

In order to understand how school board members understood concepts of democracy and the school board's role in facilitating democratic practices, we posed several questions during our interviews focused on defining and operationalizing democracy. As publicly elected officials tasked with collaboratively setting the school district's vision, it could be expected that school board members would have a working definition or conceptualization of how democracy functions at a local level. However, when asked about their understanding of democracy, half of our participants struggled to provide an answer. Riley explained "I can talk about school boards all day. But democracy? I don't know." Similarly, Parker paused for a moment to reflect, ultimately offering an answer but closing with "Yeah, I haven't had enough coffee to have a definition for democracy."

Defining Democracy Along the Continua

In several cases, it was clear that members had considered what democracy meant to them even if they struggled to provide a concrete definition. As illustrated in Table 2, participants' definitions of democracy could be categorized along the traditional notions of democracy exemplified by our model (i.e., participatory vs. representative democracy). Miguel noted that in his opinion "school boards are probably the most representative democracy in our country." He went on to explain that boards have a particular opportunity to be key spaces for community voice and representation as:

> There are really no requirements [to serve as a board member] other than you have to be 18, registered voter, and live within the jurisdiction where you hope to serve. There are no professional requirements. You don't have to have a degree… [or] prior government

or political experience. The idea is to have people from the community representing that

community [and] making decisions for them.

The concept of democracy as representation was echoed across interviews, as Jordan shared that democracy offered communities an opportunity for their voices to be heard through their elected officials, "When I think of democracy, it's the will of the people. That we serve as representatives of the community." Similarly, Taylor explained "I think we live in a representative democracy where we cast a vote, we elect someone that we trust, or at least we like the cut of their jib, or the ideas, and then we let them run with it." Notably, these conceptions of democracy are explicitly aligned with more representative understandings of democracy (Schumpeter, 1942) as opposed to a more participatory model that encourages direct engagement of constituents with leaders (Fung & Wright, 2001; Mueller, 2004).

Yet some participants, like Alex and Parker, specifically leaned toward a more participatory approach to district governance that prioritized direct engagement or involvement in district decision-making. Other participants, like Taylor, who was primarily oriented toward a more representative approach to democracy, also offered a more expansive understanding of democracy that expressed a more participatory vision:

I don't want to minimize participatory democracy because I think participatory

democracy is what happens when students camp out [at] their universities and call

attention to issues that they are passionate about…That's democracy in action, too. …I do

like the enshrinement of rights and I love the ability of people to speak out against the

government. And I think that is participatory democracy: people organizing and gathering

and making their voices heard.

The nuanced nature of some participants' conceptions of democracy suggest that board

members' understandings may be dynamic and dependent on a given situation. Regardless, all

participants expressed some level of understanding that a board members' role was to be a

conduit through which some segment of their communities (e.g., representing teachers, students,

marginalized communities, taxpayers) can influence policy and decision-making.

<insert Table 2 here>

Contested Notions of the Goal(s) and Purpose(s) of Democracy

When asked about the purpose and goals of democracy, participants offered varying, competing interpretations underscoring the complexities of supporting local democracy. As described above, board members often framed their understanding of democracy as being in service of providing a voice to represent different constituencies. Alex explained that "...the goal of democracy is to give power to the people in a community or in a state." Miguel agreed, sharing that "democracy means being able to voice my opinions, either as an individual or through my elected representatives." However, these understandings of democracy being in service of representing varying constituencies sometimes clashed with the realities of local governance, where the school board governs as a collective, rather than as individual representatives. These tensions are often lived out along the vertical axis of our framework that acknowledges key differences between a more deliberative and interest-based approach.

For example, Dana described the complicated nature of enacting local democracy by delineating the tensions between democratic ideals and realities of representing different interests. He explained that in his view, the United States is not a democracy, but rather "a republic that protects minority rights…We live in a republic that recognizes that we need to protect everyone's rights at everyone else's expense." Other board members agreed about the importance of protecting minority rights, such as Miguel who shared that democracy existed to ensure "...that the majority does not silence the minority …That there is an opportunity for different voices and to ensure that even those who are in power don't go unchecked."

Ultimately, a supermajority of board members (7/10) conceptualized the purpose of democracy as promoting the common or greatest good to the best extent possible. For example, Jordan explained that "The goal is to move us all forward … [The goal] should be around the

collective good." Other participants, like Morgan, agreed with this premise, describing the goal of democracy as being able to "...be comfortable with balancing equity and efficiency in a way where it leads to the greatest good." The balancing act that Morgan describes emerged in other interviews as well, with board members explicitly centering the work of democracy as a collective effort in bettering the lives of all people. Charlie explained:

> I think it's important that we're all participating in a respectful way to move the country
>
> forward. And however we do that, I do it in my little tiny spot. …. I feel like that is
>
> important in democracy, that we're trying to move everybody forward. Not just ourselves.

While this understanding of democracy being in service of the greater good was prevalent across the participants, our data also raised important questions around the extent to which school boards, as currently designed, are positioned to design and enact policies to advance the collective good as opposed to primarily complying with legal requirements and ensuring financial solvency for the district. These questions are particularly salient given the challenges of the current socio-political context where boards are regularly tasked with mediating contentious debates over issues that at times can seem beyond the scope of the board's role, even as community members may expect the board to be more responsive to their concerns. In the following section, we describe the various ways in which board members recounted their experiences enacting democracy in practice, including the challenges and successes they faced in operationalizing their priorities and shaping the role of the school board.

RQ2: How do school board members enact or experience democracy in practice?

Overall, board members described daily democratic practices that typically resembled a representative, interest-based set of activities often anchored in protecting the district and maintaining the status quo. While a few board members were content with these experiences and

saw democratic governance operating as intended, many raised concerns and aspired to democratic processes that were more participatory, deliberative, and/or justice-oriented. Below we describe their experiences, challenges and successes within the three dimensions of democracy: who is involved and how they make sense of their role, how they engage, and for what purpose.

Pressures and Possibilities When Representing Multiple Constituencies

As described previously, school board members approached their work as representatives of the broader community, yet often differed in how they made sense of and enacted this representative role. Virtually all board members reported limited public engagement in board decision-making, though they interpreted the lack of participation in very different ways. Though most board members saw themselves representing a broad constituency – including students, families, residents, staff – half prioritized particular groups. When asked who they represent, most board members emphasized their duty to serve all students, families, and residents of the district. This held true even for those elected by trustee area rather than at-large. "While there are elected interest areas," said Miguel, "we still say we represent the entirety of the school district." Yet, half also prioritized particular groups they felt were traditionally underrepresented in decision-making arenas. Taylor prioritized educators, noting "If I came with any purpose or ulterior motive, it was… [being] pro classroom educator. …When in doubt I was going to land on their side of the equation." For one board member, this included students with disabilities and English language learners. Three others emphasized students of color, immigrant students, and/or LGBTQ students.

Our interviews also consistently revealed that the experiences and intersectional identities of board members shaped their views of representation, their priorities, and how they made sense

of their roles. Alex, who prioritized Black student achievement, attested to the importance of his identity:

> [L]ived experience does matter when you're at the table when decisions are being made because the perspective and the lens you bring is very different. It's students who look like me who aren't reading. …because that was me when I was there as a student, not reading.

Reflecting on her motivations to run, Morgan spoke passionately about the importance of being a woman of color serving on the board: "I felt that there weren't many people who...were already in positions of authority or power who reflected the voices of people like myself." She later noted the value of this lived experience in board decision-making:

> [H]aving a woman on the board…makes a difference in the decisions that are made. We had a Title IX case. And coming from the spaces that I'm coming from, it seemed like a no-brainer that we were going to have a particular stance. But when that wasn't the case, and not because [the other board members] are bad people but there are things that they're blind to based on their background and their identities…I left that meeting [thinking], 'Okay, this is why we need more women on these boards, in positions of authority, because there are decisions being made about women [where] our voices may not be represented, and the decision could have gone in a completely different direction.' Had someone not been there to explain and walk through ethically what we were making a decision on.

For others, their intersectional identities brought unwavering values and commitments that guided their decisions, as Miguel explained:

[T]wo aspects of who I am, of my identity, my immigrant background, as well as my

LGBTQ background, really shape, how I look at things, how I process things, what

decisions that I make, mostly because I want to make sure that everything is student

centered, and, [that] the programs or resources that we bring, I want to make sure that

they're inclusive of our entire population...

Most faced dilemmas of representation – age-old tensions taken up in the literature on

representative democracy at all levels. Consistent with these longstanding tensions between

autonomy and accountability, several board members noted challenges in how to represent their

constituents while still advancing decisions they believed would benefit the best interests of the

community. In other words, should they consider themselves a delegate, who is the messenger

for their voters, or a trustee, elected to use their best judgment in service of the common good of

the district? This dilemma was particularly salient for board members anchored in justice-

centered views of democracy. Riley characterized this a balancing act around advancing equity:

[T]here's a balance between things being a democracy or everyone feeling like they have

a say, and moving the needle with equity, which requires you to sometimes make a

decision that isn't reflective of what your constituents are saying, necessarily, but is what

is right for kids.

While board members seeking to make change and advance equity clearly favored a conception

of representation allowing for autonomy, they identified others on their board who leaned more

heavily toward an accountability orientation.

Contrasting views often played out in board disagreements. Mia, for example, described a

controversial board meeting around the selection of books. She struggled with decisions around

how to address concerns of constituents who vote and have the power to remove her from office

without compromising her commitment to her moral stance (and moral constituents) on appropriate books for English classes. Though she ultimately came up with a strategy allowing her to decide what she thought was best while publicly recognizing conservative perspectives (e.g., speaking on the record asking questions about the appropriateness of books), she noted that other board members did not always align with this view of autonomous representation. In fact, some often leaned on a perceived "mandate" from voters to not engage in discussion or entertain ideas that might be perceived as counter to constituent demands. Commenting on the difficulty of working with a board colleague, Mia said "He's like, anytime you try to criticize him...'You're trying to disenfranchise me, I'm elected. This is what people elected me to do.'"

Conflicting preferences of various constituent groups at times forced difficult decisions around whose interests to represent. For example, in meetings about a recently passed facilities bond, Alex reported the difficulty of reconciling differing preferences among citizens and school staff:

> The community wants to see something shiny. Staff knows what actually needs to be done...if we don't do something shiny, the community will say "We gave you that money. You didn't do anything."…But then staff will [say] "Our water doesn't work. We need central AC. We need HVAC."...Do we just say that we don't listen to staff and we listen to the community? Or do you just listen to the staff?

Riley found a similar tension in authentically representing more affluent, White constituents who "host parties for me to come and speak at" and other constituents with different needs. In particular, she found it challenging to speak to the more affluent groups about justice-oriented work focused on the needs of the less affluent constituents of color.

Aspirations Toward a More Participatory Decision-Making Process

Though in theory school board meetings provided opportunities for constituents to play a more direct role in decision-making, most board members lamented a lack of community participation. While many board members reported heightened community engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic, most noticed that board meeting attendance had greatly dissipated. Jordan observed that "I think we have struggled since the kind of chaos of COVID to return back to well attended meetings." While some attributed low participation to apathy, Taylor identified structural constraints:

> It's the people that live in the areas where schools are Title I, they don't have time to come to board meetings, they're working the second or third job, these are people that are housing insecure, food insecure, they don't have the free time to engage in the same meetings that the Moms of Liberty do.

Several board members suggested that a lack of attendance may simply reflect the fact that community members felt well represented by board members or satisfied. As Jordan explained, community members may think:

> Schools are doing okay. My kid seems happy. I don't have time to go on a Tuesday to sit in this room and listen to a lot of bureaucracy. So I'll just stay on the side and trust these people to do what they need to do.

Similarly, Charlie noted that parents generally showed up when they were dissatisfied: "when things are going well, the attendance at the school boards, you know, is fewer, and then when something's going wrong, or there's an issue, then that's when they get a packed house."

When reflecting on the modes of governance, school board members shared fairly consistent descriptions of one-way communication with constituents and non-deliberative interactions in board meetings. Most SBMs described the value of some one-way forms of

interaction with constituents that exemplified more interest-based forms of engagement. These board members noted that conversations, emails, and visits helped them assess needs and interests – making them in essence better representatives. As Taylor noted:

> I think it's because the messaging is very much one way, when the community, wants to speak to us board members, the way that is done, and I would say fairly effectively [is] generally sending emails, either to one or all of the board, and often copying members of cabinet, the superintendent…We will get lots of emails that would have the same text, and that would help us understand what hot button we were going to have to address…Where I perceived…they had an honest issue with something in the district, it absolutely would cause me to drill down look for more information.

Riley similarly believed that these forms of communication helped them understand and better represent constituent needs in board decision-making:

> [T]here's a place for us needing to have a conversation and me not just to rely on like my superintendent's messaging of the conversation that was had. ... part of it's about are you actually being a good steward of what you're intending to do, and representing the community? So if I'm going to union meetings and I'm sitting at community events and I'm hearing what's happening, then when I'm on the dais, I can bring in those perspectives.

> Miguel described the value of one-way communication in the other direction: "a big part of what we do as trustees, we want to make sure that we're providing and sharing information with everyone and making sure that it goes out in a timely manner." Nevertheless, as explored further below, many lamented the inability to engage in more two-way forms of communication.

Board meetings were widely seen as performative – limiting deliberation and authentic participation (from the community and within the board).

School Board Meetings as Performative Public Spaces

Consistent with our own observations of board meetings, the majority of board members characterized board meetings as non-deliberative spaces, scripted to conform with state laws and requirements to make decisions "in the open." Dana depicted them as a checklist of items to get through: "It's rote approval of budget. It's rote approval, action items and consent agendas." Similarly, Taylor likened the meetings to a classical Japanese performance:

Our system has been so calibrated for fear of people abusing the system that it somehow is throttled from living up to its actual intent…School board meetings are not places for people's ideas to be debated on the merit...It is very Kabuki...We already know what it is ...We've already been read in on it and we've already agreed to it.

Some noted heightened performativity during election season when board members up for re-election used these meetings to produce "sound bites" for their campaigns (Mia), signal allyship to interest groups (Mia), or "grandstand" with "award-winning speeches" (Alex). Mia recounted an incident when a colleague insisted they vote in open session on a labor matter because "They wanted to make sure the unions knew whether she [another board member up for re-election] was supportive or not, because they painted that topic as either you're pro-labor or anti-labor." Dana pointed to what he saw as improper use of power by his school board president to shut down discussion. "The president sets the agenda with the superintendent," he explained, "So if you manipulate the process itself and protocols to exclude people, it's not democratic, and my rights aren't being protected by the very people that should be protecting them in this process."

As a result of this perceived power play, Dana noted, "We've avoided every controversial issue on this board."

A few members offered counter-examples that attested to more deliberative opportunities within the board meeting structure. For example, Morgan noted that the "public comment" period in meetings at times sparked important new conversations among the board and between board and administrators:

We've also had instances where the community will show up and share their input and organize and come in, and that has led to the board asking the superintendent, why certain things weren't thought through, you know, thoroughly. So in that case, I don't think it's performative.

Jordan recalled that there are more meaningful deliberations occurring during closed sessions, albeit outside of the public view:

Because we go in and we vote and [the public] don't realize that, 'Hey, we were locked in closed session for an hour and a half, going back and forth on this issue.' They're not privy to a lot of these things. And so sometimes there's that feeling of "Well, you didn't even deliberate it, you didn't even talk about it."

Nevertheless, most agreed that the spaces were limited in their ability to foster two-way dialogue and authentic participation.

Finding a Way Forward for More Participatory, Deliberative Spaces

Ultimately, board members expressed a longing for something more meaningful with regards to who participated and how they governed. Most had strong aspirations for more participatory and deliberative forms of democratic engagement. Though a few board members were content with the current form of engagement - particularly when decisions centered on

topics beyond their scope of expertise - many board members conveyed a desire for more meaningful opportunities to engage with one another and with their constituents. Taylor shared:

> I think it would be great for the five of us ... to sit up there and have people come and ask questions and then have each of us have a discussion and someone give an answer and someone else maybe disagree publicly…but that is just totally beyond the pale of what's permissible now.

The aspiration for more meaningful deliberation among board members was particularly common among participants (Alex, Mia, Miguel, Dana) who reported being in the minority or serving on a divided board. Mia lamented her board's interest-based approach to decisions, in which votes are taken with little opportunity for consideration of ideas or reason-based discussions. She described herself as being "naïve" for thinking other board members came to the table with similar deliberative intent.

Some board members found opportunities for more meaningful engagement and deliberation outside of board meetings. Several board members described occasions where they engaged in more of a two-way exchange with community members and their fellow board members outside of the formal board meetings. These opportunities were valued highly by the justice-oriented board members who conveyed an understanding of democracy and representation as carrying an ethos of deeper participation and dialogue. That is, in order to uphold their duty as an elected representative, they needed to build more structures that allowed constituents and colleagues opportunities to not just share ideas, but discuss them with others, and have a back-and-forth to arrive at more mutual understandings and decisions aiming at either the common good or advancing the needs of underserved students. They also believed these discursive spaces could bring in more voices than those typically heard in board meetings.

For Riley, this occurred in their community schools strategy, a model which "flips the script" around "who you're engaging" and "how you're engaging them":

> [We're] bringing in people who typically aren't engaged in school decision making for all of the reasons, all of the barriers that exist...It is a mandate for community members that are impacted by the decisions at the schools...to be involved in the decision making and as a part of a conversation.

In several other districts, "study sessions" provided the opportunity for deeper engagement and perceived improvements in policy decisions. The previously mentioned study session around a bond initiative provided Alex that sought-after opportunity to not just listen but have an exchange. "It was a dialogue," he explained, made possible legally because "we were only going in pairs of two, with the superintendent and our business services and our consultants, so that we were able to respond and engage." In the end, the member reported that these conversations went on to "change our plan…about what construction would happen, when and what sites would be touched when and where on the sites."

Governance for Compliance or Justice-Oriented Change

As reflected in the findings above, board members differed in how they both conceptualized and enacted democracy in practice. The ways in which they thought about and experienced representation (who) and governance processes (how) reflected very different interpretations of the purposes (for what) of their work as elected board members. Many described practices that sought to protect the district, ensuring compliance with the law and fiscal solvency. Some wanted to but struggled to advance a more just vision of the district and society.

Some board members enacted their roles with a status-quo orientation that emphasized legal compliance. Jordan conveyed one such protectionist view:

We need to look at the law to uphold the effective operation of the district within it. You

know, we're constantly chasing parent concerns that run afoul of law right there or board

policy, you know, we can get tied up in litigation, and it sort of just shuts down what we

need to do from a financial sense.

Dana emphasized his role as "a government actor" and the importance of laws and rules,

lamenting the fact that others did not always share that orientation:

I think board members forget that they're elected agents of the government, that they're

acting in a government. ... we are elected officials to our local school board that is

making decisions in a legal capacity...I'm a government actor, and if I don't take up and

protect individuals rights, then I'm not doing what the Republic was created [for].

Throughout the study, Dana described actions taken to protect the district from misinterpretation

of laws and rights, as well as disagreements with others who he perceived to be "woke" or going

beyond the scope of what is legal and intended for the role of a board member.

Charlie, a school board member from a rural district, approached the position with less of

a protectionist stance and more of a belief that they were playing a ceremonial role to maintain

what administrators wanted:

[T]o say I'm an elected official seems silly. I don't feel like an elected official...it doesn't

seem like that important of a job...I feel like the district runs and we're just kind of, you

know, the formality of overseeing it so the wheels don't fall off.

In later interviews, she described approving the superintendent's actions "because we have to,

not that we necessarily are in the know on exactly all the details" and that "a lot of times, I am

reading almost from a script."

Other board members worked to advance a vision of equity and justice, reporting a mix of struggle and success. A self-described advocate for marginalized groups who brings a "critical lens" to district policies and practices, Morgan lamented that "most frequently the status quo will win out" on the board, where the majority is "coming from a space of we're doing great, like the district is wonderful, we need to maintain." Two other board members who prioritized students of color in their conceptions of who they represented (Alex and Mia) described similar challenges but also recounted several victories. Mia's successful effort to decrease the district's expulsion rate through a change in policy provided an example of an equity-oriented endeavor seeking to disrupt the status quo. Dissatisfied with the district's "old fashioned approach to drug and alcohol use," she worked hard with her colleagues to change its approach:

> [W]e really looked at this as an equity issue, a fairness issue and we revised it. So when you get caught with a vape pen or anything related to marijuana or even alcohol, your punishment is not to get expelled, but you do not have to go through a six week intensive program and each school you are going to lose one of your electives...we really changed the approach and the administration is super happy with it. And as a result this year, we have not expelled a single student.

Reflecting on this victory she affirmed her belief in purpose: "I do think that part of our role is to look at some of our policies and practices and improve upon them."

RQ3: How do current socio-political conditions shape how board members enact democracy at the local level?

Managing the Tensions of an Increasingly Politicized Local Environment

Media reports since the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic have repeatedly noted increasing levels of tension at school board meetings. Much of this has been attributed to pressures from external political groups and movements such as Moms for Liberty and other

politically conservative groups who have sought to influence what schools teach, how schools function, and who is positioned to shape educational policies and decisions. Several of our participants explained that this nationalization of formerly local education policy and decision making had significant impacts on the ways that they operated as school board members. Morgan noted that there was often a clear disconnect between what community members believed was the role and responsibility of the school board and the realities of local board governance. She noted:

> …There is sometimes confusion about what decisions are being made at which levels of government. A lot can come to local school boards where the local school boards don't have the ability to make these decisions and are kind of bound by decisions that are made at higher levels.

Some of these tensions arose due to some members' belief that school boards should be nonpartisan institutions that do not get involved in national political discussions or issues even if they faced calls from their community to take public stances on certain issues or conflicts. As Mia shared:

> All of our board members, but myself, have asked that we place on our board agenda for June, a ceasefire resolution with respect to Gaza. And I have requested that it not be put on the agenda, because I don't think it's the purview of our board to be taking a position on that national conflict.

Despite this belief in the apolitical nature of school board service, other participants acknowledged that the notion of school boards being insulated from national politics was difficult, if not impossible, given shifts in the national political context. Taylor described this tension by explaining that "There's that wonderful shibboleth that we are nonpartisan and that is

becoming harder and harder to maintain that fiction, I think, in the current era." He attributed much of this shift in school board politics to organized, conservative efforts, highlighting how "...a lot of the coordination on this sort of this anti-school board or these political attacks on school boards, comes out of Steve Bannon's organization. I mean, he basically wrote a playbook on this."

Others noted that the influence of national politics had also impacted the ability to run for and win a school board election due to coordinated campaigns and political attacks. When reflecting on the challenges of running for election to previously low-turnout, low-dollar school board seats, Jordan succinctly tied these efforts to the possibilities of local democratic governance. He explained that "...the disinformation that goes in and the money that's involved to win these seats…It's democracy, but it's not an authentic form of democracy, right? It is the flaws of democracy that happens." Similarly, Taylor connected the shifts in the nationalization of local politics as detrimental to democracy, noting:

> There's every incentive to be as extreme as possible to secure your base in this country and that's not great. That's bad for democracy. It's bad for the idea of any kind of collective agreement. I mean, we're living in it. You can see it. I don't have to explain this. You can just turn on the TV.

Structural Limitations on Participatory or Deliberative Community Engagement.

As board members considered the extent to which they were able to engage in more participatory or deliberative forms of local governance, many noted the difficulties in attempting to work within the confines of the Ralph M. Brown Act of 1953, a state-wide law designed to mitigate corruption in public institutions by establishing guidelines that ensure public access to

government meetings. When asked about how boards might foster greater community participation in public meetings, Taylor shared:

> I would prefer that. But I think that the laws that regulate public meetings really work against that. You know, the obvious place is public comment. But my understanding is by statute, we're prevented from responding in real time. There's no dialogue in the public comment…We are not to comment on anything that is not on the agenda and [we ask] the public not to comment on things that are not on the agenda. But of course they do and we generally allow it because we don't want people to perceive themselves as being stonewalled out of the meeting.

Relatedly, board members noted that the rules of engagement in public meetings, such as board members being unable to directly respond to public comments, are not well-known to community members, many of whom are expecting a public response to their concerns. AsAlex explained "It's hard to explain the constraints on the law to people who are not experts. So how do you say 'We legally cannot respond?'…It's more constrained than people could ever even imagine." Miguel described having to prepare community members for these constraints, explaining:

> If you come to me and say 'This is happening to my students and I want you to do XYZ,' the board president who's chairing the meeting will basically say 'Thank you for your comments. Don't take it personally because that's what we have to do. Because there are laws in place that we have to follow'.

> Participants also noted that these policies and guidelines not only limited their ability to engage in dialogue with community members, but also severely impacted their ability to engage with each other. For example, the Brown Act places strict limitations on how and when public

officials can discuss public business. As Taylor explained "...outside of the board meeting any two of you can talk, or you and the superintendent, but the minute you add a third person, then you start falling afoul of these laws." Alex expressed frustration with these constraints, noting differences between the ways that state legislators operated and the different expectations placed on school boards:

> I see why the legislature put that law into effect but there's a huge disconnect with the legislature and local offices. The legislature runs very 'do as I say, not as I do,' because they have closed door meetings as caucuses all the time and we are unable to do that. So conversations in Sacramento that they're having in their caucuses, behind closed doors, without reporters, without the public, off the record, they are telling us we need to have in public.

It is important to note that not all participants viewed the Brown Act as a barrier to their work as a board. Mia emphasized that "Brown keeps us honest, right? So that we're not all doing backroom deals and by the time we get to the open session, it's all done." Yet she ultimately acknowledged that the Brown Act did have a negative effect on participatory or deliberative approaches to school governance. After explaining various strategies of working with the superintendent to address community concerns, Mia admitted "Yes, in that respect, it's very artificial in terms of dialogue. There's not a dialogue. It's one-way."

Barriers to Board Service and the Implications for Equity and Justice

Many board members felt deterred by the time investment, financial cost, political tensions and emotional toll of running for and serving on a board – which, for some, constrained representation, engagement, and efforts to move beyond the status quo. Board members reported spending significant amounts of time on board-related activities, with some particularly noting

increases in recent years. SBMs complained about that the low to no pay[1] relative to the time invested, and explained that this made serving difficult for people who do not have flexible jobs and/or have significant personal responsibilities, as Miguel reported:

> So, after taxes, I bring home a whopping $250 a month. ... that's a big barrier, when people look at these positions ... you have to put in the time and effort to run and fundraise. And then if you get elected you put in the time to represent the community, not only at board meetings, but at other community functions, but you don't get compensated very well for it.

Riley felt more successful at the job before starting a family, explaining:

> When I first joined the board, I felt like I was doing a really good job…before having kids and all that jazz. I mean, it was like 20 hours a week with board things. Where I'm meeting with our unions and hosting coffee chats for the community and going to community events, and visiting schools and doing all the things that make you a good board member, because your ear's to the ground, and you're engaging.

> Several board members observed increased levels of conflict and polarization taking up

their time and attention. Taylor dated this back to the pandemic, when "Moms for Liberty people [were] coming at us." Alex explained,

> People want to know what we're doing about critical race theory and what we're doing about book bans and what we're doing about abortion rights, which are all very important issues. Most of which I don't think is the role of the school board.

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[1] California law allows compensation of school board members based on a district's average daily attendance (ADA). Compensation ranges from $60 a month for very small school districts to $1,500 a month for districts with over 60,000 students. School districts with more than 250,000 ADA receive compensation as determined by local city charter law or applicable regulations. State law also allows compensation (financial or elective course credit) for student board members. (California Education Code § 35120, 2024)

The emotional toll of these pressures emerged in many of our conversations. While not all board members had experienced culture war conflicts portrayed in the media, some suspected or feared they were imminent. Others, like Riley, noted the difficulty of continually pushing for change or being caught up in difficult, public efforts to fight against the status quo:

> [I]t's just really hard to actually change the way our system works. And you get so much pushback from ... the people that come to your board meetings, that are the people that tend to hold power. And so lots of districts, lots of boards kind of cave under that pressure…it's not really fun to be on the receiving end of…what people say on NextDoor, social media, all of these places, or when you're pushing against these systems, and it is really challenging to sit through that know you're doing the right work.

Two board members who had faced recall attempts shared similar concerns about the emotional toll of that experience. For months following a failed recall attempt, Taylor shared, "I just walked around in my neighborhood and I didn't know who was going to come up to me and laugh at me, spit my face, tell me I'm an idiot, tell me to resign. ... every time someone approached me in Costco, I like braced myself, you know? I could feel my heart."

For board members of color, these burdens were particularly acute. Riley described the psychological toll of personally pushing to address inequities while facing constant pushback and little support:

> [W]ho's willing to really stick their neck out? Not that many people…who's the one that really is going to push on this [inequities revealed in data] because it's personal and in so many ways. And then…the pushback that you get as a result of that…Every single person of color elected official that I've talked to, I mean, the number of times that people are

like, "Why am I doing this?…I should just resign, right?"…[I]t takes a huge toll on

people.

Ultimately, many feared that these burdens would limit others from wanting to run for office.

"Our biggest concern," said Taylor, "is what happens when we don't want to do this anymore,

who will fill those shoes, because we don't see a lot of people interested in being on the board."

A few board members, such as Dana, explicitly named time constraints as a reason for

not running again or not being as present as they believed a board member should be:

Time? Well, that's why I'm not running again…I'm a father, I'm a husband, first of all.

My family is very important. And with our notices and our weekly summaries, we get

about 20 pages a week. That's pretty heavy reading, because you're asking yourself

questions or getting the material.

Jordan noted these challenges were especially difficult in smaller districts that paid very little for

board service and, as a result, were likely to end up with limited "viewpoints" and

"perspectives":

[W]ithout that flexibility, I'm not sure how someone can take on this role if they're not

retired, or, you know, financially self-sufficient in some other way…when I talk about

the broad perspective you need on school boards, I think that can be difficult. And so I

think that's something we have to think about, as who is able to serve on boards? And

how does that maybe narrow the lens or viewpoints of and perspective of who is on those

boards when it comes to smaller school boards that don't have that compensation that is

needed.

Beyond the detrimental effects on representation and who could serve, one might extend these

concerns about the burdens of serving to board efforts to create change and realize justice-

oriented goals. As many had noted, the lived experiences and intersectional identities often drove members to prioritize the needs of marginalized groups and to challenge the status quo, yet it was these same members who faced a self-reported "toll" for trying to enact those goals. Without a diverse board, who would take up these justice-oriented aims?

Discussion and Implications

Building from one of the initial questions that motivated this study, our findings highlighted the contested, complex, and political nature of democracy and how it is understood. Beyond the normative assumptions that mediate understandings and theories of democracy (e.g. "Democracy means people vote for us", "Majority rule"), school board members not only struggled to "define" democracy, but identified a need for a more robust understanding and conversation around democracy and what it looks like in practice. Similarly, when asked about the role of school boards in conversation with broader theories of democracy, board members offered varying, competing interpretations that added further confusion and tension to their own sense-making.

When translating democracy from theory into practice, our findings further illustrated how the school board members in our study negotiated multiple, often competing roles and purposes in the day-to-day (e.g., advocating for justice-oriented change or insulating the district from external political influences). These roles and purposes—at times incommensurable—each alluded to and referenced a different understanding of democracy and had deep implications for school board members and how they saw their roles within the democratic governance of school systems. In practice, these tensions often manifested as a series of dilemmas, including traditional dilemmas around representation versus direct participation, social reproduction versus social change, and protecting the rights of the minority while honoring or representing the

majority. Additionally, newer dilemmas emerged related to the growing calls for racial justice in education, increasing attacks in public education, and the growing influence of national culture war politics on the local governance of schools.

In conversation with one of the axes (see Figure 1) central to our theorizing of school board democracy (social reproduction vs justice-oriented), these tensions became particularly acute and consequential for SBMs that believed in a justice-oriented vision of democracy. In many of these cases, we found a large chasm between the aspirations for what democracy can or should be, and what it "actually was." In general, these SBMs' aspirations coalesced visions of more equitable, participatory, and direct democratic practice in which stakeholders, and especially stakeholders and experiences that are often left out of the democratic process, could effectively participate in the governance of local school systems. However, most experienced consequential chasms between those visions and aspirations and how democracy operated in practice. These gaps and the performativity that was demanded from them resulted in what they saw as ineffective participatory structures, and in turn, the reproduction of inequitable and unjust educational systems for marginalized students and families.

Resonating with what critical scholars have described as a process of salvaging the innocence of the oppressor (Tuck & Yang, 2012), of hegemonically and strategically disguising anti-democratic and heavily asymmetrical realities as democratic as itself a strategy for distinction (Fraser, 1990), some SBMs described this "performance" of democracy not as innocent or innocuous but as problematic and asymmetrically consequential (i.e., who gets impacted by the absence of authentic democracy?). When further interrogating what was "performative," SBs described various 'artificial,' 'rote' practices ranging from: public utterances of caring and being concerned; discrepancies between outside/public and

inside/private conversations; performances of 'listening' to community; to strategic relationships between superintendents, leadership, and boards that undermined the will of the public, pretending to share power with students, and attempting to appear democratic whilst only rubber stamping or going through the motions.

Through interrogating and reflecting upon the ways in which the current moment "matters" for school boards and school board members, it quickly became clear how the context, including the sociopolitical context, is increasingly changing faster than school boards—and more broadly, society's— ability to process, make sense, and adapt to such changes. Starting with the modes and sites of deliberation—all foundational to democratic practice—our findings highlight the ways in which technological shifts, social media, and strategic monetary investments influence local politics (Henig et al., 2019; Reckhow et al., 2017) and have radically shifted the circuits that produce, distribute, and manufacture ideas, power, and in turn educational policy and practice. Combined with a highly polarized environment, systemic attacks on public education, and growing state and federal policies attempting to govern "education," SBMs often find themselves and their boards at a critical juncture absent the tools and/or structures to move through it productively.

From the onset of this study, we believed that the urgency of the moment warranted a critical examination of the day-to-day experiences of school board members in the midst of constant cycles of crises. In particular, our work has sought to better understand the lived realities of school board members navigating rapidly changing sociopolitical contexts so that we might better support board members in realizing the promise of more just and equitable education systems and overall society. Together, we believe our findings further elucidate what many scholars have described as a crisis of democracy (Giroux, 2021), an erosion of trust on

public institutions (Deane, 2024), and the dilemmas and complexities experienced by those intended to sort out, negotiate, and fulfill the promises of these purportedly public and democratic institutions.

Paired with a lack of clarity and cohesion in regard to democratic practice, these crises spill into, and detract our attention and our resources away from some of the critical elements and purposes of these very systems (e.g. teaching and learning). Moreover, as heightened awareness of the power of local school boards continues to grow and many SBMs experience the multiple tensions highlighted above, these challenges impact their ability to do the work that they believe necessary and possible. Furthermore, our data suggests that such challenges may extend to SBMs' personal wellbeing, leading to decreased motivation to serve and posing serious challenges for local democracy and its capacity to include a variety of voices and experiences.

We aim to put this work in conversation with the growing literature on how school district leaders are navigating the constantly shifting educational landscape (Kitchens & Goldberg, 2024; Knight-Abowitz, 2025; Marsh et al., 2022), in particular with regard to advancing educational equity and justice (Daramola et al., 2023; Darden & Cavendish, 2012; Jones & Jones, 2022; Sampson, 2019, 2025). Based on our findings, we urge researchers to continue to investigate how school board routines, policies, and norms facilitate or inhibit more inclusive, participatory, and deliberative democratic practices. Researchers might also consider examining the extent to which more participatory policies (e.g., appointing student board members, increasing opportunities for public comment) ultimately shape district policy and decision-making.

We also suggest a more expansive set of opportunities for policymakers and practitioners, specifically regarding board member training and socialization. Our findings emphasize the

complex nature of serving on a school board and mediating a series of conflicts and tensions, some of which promise to continue as many school districts are facing difficult decisions regarding declining enrollment, school closures, and limited financial resources (Fensterwald et al., 2025). These challenges have only been exacerbated by the recent shifts in federal immigration policy, new interpretations of Title IX, and proposed cuts to the federal Department of Education and funding. As several of our participants explained, school board training and professional development must be aligned to meet the challenges of today's reality, particularly as board members often lack specific training on how to manage conflict both within the school board and within the broader community. At a time when some state legislatures, including California's, are currently debating expanded training requirements for board members, this research offers timely evidence supporting the need for increased capacity-building for board members. New training could support members' abilities to respond to the perceived increased demands of the role and advance a more transformative approach to board service.

Conclusion

As educators, scholars, and community members simultaneously invest in the future of public education and the importance of democratic governance in the pursuit for a more just education, we are also witnesses to the growing attacks and erosion of trust in these long-standing and importantly, contested, institutions. While we believe our findings address under-examined questions about the nature and dynamics of local democracies and of local democratic actors (e.g. school boards and school board members) within a rapidly changing context, they open new sets of questions that we believe require more participatory, action-oriented, and collective inquiry. As school boards are poised to play an outsized role in education policy under the Trump administration (Peetz, 2025), the extent to which local politics and our engagements

with "small" and proximal democratic life will impact our beliefs, commitments, and understandings of democracy as a path forward will only grow.

Our work affirms the realities of the difficulties in fostering a robust participatory and deliberative form of democracy particularly due to the challenges of negotiating multiplicity and differences in ways that honor the people's experiences and beliefs. Despite such difficulties, we fundamentally believe that local democracy remains a worthwhile project particularly because the other end of the spectrum is fascism and authoritarianism. These anti-democratic beliefs and values will only grow stronger if we continue to disengage from the difficult collective conversations and practices necessary to shape and iterate better versions of a democracy able to speak to the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of all community members, but particularly those who have often been relegated to the margins of decision-making within our institutions.

Lastly, we believe that the tasks of learning how to live together, integral to democracy, can begin and be maintained across our political institutions. However, if we are to entertain this possibility of a shared future, then we must begin investing in the spaces and places where this actually takes place (i.e. classrooms, school boards). If anything was made clear by the school board members that were a part of this study, it is that many aspire to an ideal of a "better" form of democracy that expands the process of educational decision-making. If we are to do so, it is critical that we do not take democracy or democratic practices for granted, and work towards building the capacity of school board members to live up to the promise of more just, local democracy.

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Table 1

Participant and District Demographic Information

School Board Member	District Urbanicity	District Enrollment	% Non-White Enrollment	% Economically Disadvantaged Enrollment	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	Age	Years Served	Community Political Leaning
Morgan	Midsize City	>20,000	70-90%	20-50%	F	Asian	<35	New	Solid Dem
Taylor	Small City	>20,000	70-90%	20-50%	M	White	35-50	Exp	Dem Leaning
Jordan	Large Suburban	2,000-5,000	70-90%	<20%	M	Asian	35-50	Exp	Strong Dem
Alex	Large Suburban	5,000-10,000	70-90%	<20%	M	Multiracial	<35	Exp	Strong Dem
Mia	Large Suburban	10,000-20,000	>90%	>80%	F	Hispanic	>50	Exp	Solid Dem
Miguel	Large Suburban	5,000-10,000	>90%	>80%	M	Hispanic	35-50	Exp	Strong Dem
Riley	Midsize City	10,000-20,000	70-90%	20-50%	F	Black	35-50	Exp	Strong Dem
Parker	Rural	<2,000	50-70%	20-50%	F	White	35-50	New	Rep Leaning
Dana	Large Suburban	2,000-5,000	50-70%	<20%	M	Hispanic	>50	Exp	Strong Dem
Charlie	Rural	<2,000	50-70%	50-80%	F	White	>50	Vet	Strong Rep

Note: Years Served: New = 1 year or less; Experienced = 1-5; Veteran= >5   Ranges used to protect anonymity Source: https://www.ed-data.org/ 2022-23. Political leaning was determined based on data from the winning margin for the most recently available presidential election (NYTimes, n.d.). Strong Dem/Strong Rep= margin of >30%, Solid Dem/Solid Rep= margin of 15%-29%, Dem/Rep Leaning= margin of 1%-14%.

Table 2. Board Members' Orientation to Democracy

Board Member	Orientation to Democracy	Illustrative Quote
Morgan	Representative	In 2020, with all of the conversations that we were having around race around [and] systemic inequities and just ways that our governments were not representative…I felt that there was a duty for myself and my friends to go from, you know, these book clubs and just kind of discussions and learning about all of the ways that systems are broken to trying to do something about it.
Taylor	Representative	I think, in practice…for me, my time on the school board allows me the opportunity to try to expand the voice of people who I think have been traditionally underrepresented.
Jordan	Representative	I think when people run for school board, they often see themselves as a vehicle to process parent concerns and complaints, you know? To do so can often get you into the weeds [and] cloud your vision from what the school board member's role is, and also what the school district does, and how we as board members support the effective running of a school district.
Alex	Participatory	It's really easy to get caught up in the bureaucracy of the district office. Right? Like we sit in these seats with lights and camera cameras…it's like a problem…I want less bureaucracy, less board meetings, and more constituent engagement. Some of my colleagues disagree. The chair this year disagrees that we had a ton of other meetings. So you know, maybe just a different approach to leadership.
Mia	Representative	I've spent most of my time doing stuff that I should be doing. Because I view [the board's role] to be public-facing and front-facing. Like, I think that that's our role. We're supposed to be the face of the district. And so like, how can you do that when you're not present in the district?
Miguel	Representative	The voters of this community elected us to represent them and their interests, and we are supposed to put our own personal interests aside, and put the interests of the school district which we represent ahead of our own interests.
Riley	Representative	We [board members] have a different responsibility, I would say to the community… You know, part of it's "Are you actually being a good steward…and representing the community?"…So if I'm going to union meetings, and I'm sitting at community events, and I'm hearing what's happening, then, when I'm on the dais, I can bring in those perspectives.
Parker	Participatory	Being new to [the district]…and kind of seeing the way that [the district] operates [and] having been longtime residents and then seeing this space within our community…How do we include the folks that live here? And I often think of, you know, how can we continue to engage the adults in this community in what the children are doing…the adults that don't have kids in a school.
Dana	Representative	I think board members forget that they're elected agents of the government…We are we are elected officials to our local school board that is making decisions in a legal capacity…I'm a government actor and if I don't take up and protect individuals rights, then I'm not doing what the Republic was created [to do], okay?
Charlie	Representative	The ward that I represent now is very physically close to me. And they have a Facebook group just for this little community that I represent…We kind of look out for each other. When you're farming, you know, when you're out in the middle of nowhere, it's nice to know that you have people watching your back…They've been working to try to get some roads improved and things like that. So I always go to those kinds of meetings just to be involved.