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VERMONT’S SACRED COW:
A CASE STUDY OF LOCAL CONTROL OF SCHOOLS

A Dissertation Presented
by
Michael S. Martin
to
The Faculty of the Graduate College
of
The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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Specializing in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

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ABSTRACT

When it comes to school governance, the concept of “local control” endures as a powerful social construct in some regions of the United States. In New England states, where traditional town meetings and small school districts still exist as important local institutions, the idea of local control is still an important element of policy considerations, despite increasing state and federal regulation of education in recent years.

With its small school districts and myriad governance structures, Vermont represents an extreme case example of the intersection between participatory democracy and the local control of schools. With nearly 285 school boards composed of over 1,400 school board members for a statewide k-12 population of just over 88,000 students, Vermont has the most board members per pupil in the nation. In addition, the state’s patchwork of local districts, supervisory unions, unified districts, and other governance entities make up the most complex school governance system in the country. Following the passage of Act 46 in 2015, Vermont school districts began new voluntary merger negotiations and restructuring through the process known as “unification”.

This qualitative case study of Vermont school governance examined the question of local control as a social construct across four school districts which, taken together, represent a range of attributes as defined by geography, demographics, and governance structures. Extended structured interviews comprised of image-based prompts and open-ended questions with 19 school board members provided the principal source of data. A review of state and local documents and interviews with 11 superintendents and policymakers allowed for triangulation of the data.

Results suggested these principal findings: 1) multiple meanings of local control coexist, 2) statutory requirements and limited local resources curtail the exercise of local control in practice, and 3) school boards are starting to take a broader view of governance by emphasizing stewardship over micromanagement and redefining local communities beyond town boundaries.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Being on the school board has sometimes been a frustrating experience. I am responsible for everything and have power over nothing.

—Vermont School Board Member, April 2009

The idea of school as a democratic institution is as old as democracy itself. Greatly influenced by the Enlightenment philosophers, Jefferson insisted that an enlightened citizenry was the prerequisite for a thriving democracy. Rousseau (1762/1911) argued that education fosters both personal cultivation and social efficiency, and called Plato‘s Republic "the finest treatise on education ever written" (p. 32). Later, Napoleon’s grandes écoles introduced a meritocratic system of competitive exams to replace a system that privileged the well-born over the competent. Dewey (1916) believed school should bridge class differences and transform society, and stressed that the "conception of education as a social process and function has no definite meaning until we define what kind of society we have in mind" (p. 299). Freire (1970) and Giroux (1988; 2012) have emphasized education’s crucial role in achieving social justice. Bourdieu (1977) exposed the public school’s tendency to reinforce social reproduction, even as it passes for an equitable, neutral arbiter of merit. Tyack (1995) found Americans to have "an intense faith in education—almost a religion" (p. 1). More examples could be included here, but it is well established that school plays an important role in any democracy.
Clearly public school is an important democratic institution in the US, but local control is too. In some respects, school boards have embodied democratic government at the local, grassroots level for over 200 years now. Presidents, congressional leaders, Supreme Court justices, governors, state legislators, and mayors all shape U.S. public school policy, but traditionally our schools are governed by the local school board, a uniquely American political institution whose roots go back to the common schools of early Massachusetts (Alexander & Salmon, 1995). However, despite this “cherished American tradition” (Carol, Cunningham, Danzberger, Kirst, McCloud, & Usdan, 1986), the local school board as a democratic institution has increasingly come under attack in recent years for being anachronistic (Finn, 1992), bureaucratic (Chubb & Moe, 1990), or dysfunctional (Hess, 2010).

Meanwhile, despite the absence of an education clause in the U.S. Constitution, federal control over U.S. schools has increased inexorably in recent history (Cunningham, 2003; Faber, 1991; Fuhrman, 2004; Howell, 2005; Kirst, 1978; 2004; Land, 2002; Mountford, 2008). Each passing decade has seen federal legislation which largely redefines public schools: Title I for special education in the 1960’s, Title IX to prevent gender-based discrimination in the 1970’s, IDEA to protect individuals with disabilities in the 1980’s, Goals 2000 to codify in law national education goals in the 1990’s, and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and Race to the Top to create school accountability systems in the 2000’s. While not a federal mandate, the Common Core Standards have been adopted by XX states and influence state and local decisions regarding policy, finance, and curriculum (Burke, 2012; Hess & Meeks, 2010; Manna &
Harwood, 2011). While some critics claim that NCLB was an egregious federal overreach in education, the law can also be seen as a natural continuation of decades of increasing federal control over education. And while the U.S. Department of Education under the Obama Administration appeared to soften some NCLB provisions by granting waivers and slowing the pace of school closings, Race to the Top funds still required states to promote an agenda of accountability and increased school choice (“Race to the Top Fund”, 2013).

State constitutions vary widely when it comes to education, but overall state governments are playing an ever-growing role as well, most often through policy requirements, curriculum guidelines and court-mandated finance reform, but also through school choice legislation and school takeovers (Butcher, 2013; Danzberger, Carol, Cunningham, Kirst, McClood, & Usdan, 1987; Faber, 1991; Finn, 1992b; Firestone & González, 2007; Fuhrman & Elmore, 1990; Kirst, 1978, 2008; Miron & Wimpelberg, 1992a; Pipho, 1989; Venezia, Callan, Finney, Kirst, & Usdan, 2005). If asked which government entity is responsible for their local public schools, many Americans think first of their local school board. In fact, responsibility for education legally resides with the state, with the school board serving as the local agent of the state (Briffault, 2005; Ryan, 2004; Stinebrickner, 1982; Viteritti, 2005). Since the state is the “principal agent” (Manna & Harwood, 2011) in matters of education, it is important to note that all school boards derive their legal authority from the state. The state can abolish, restrict, or circumvent local boards through various means, including district consolidation, school and district takeovers, and expanded school choice options.
With the roughly 14,000 school boards that exist in the US (Hess & Meeks, 2010), it is easy to understand why many Americans believe in the enduring tradition of local control. Nevertheless, in reality, the American public school system may more closely resemble a “tangled web of governance” (Epstein, 2004). Since public schools have traditionally relied on local property taxes for funding (Brown, 1996; Manna & Harwood, 2011), it is easy to understand why many taxpayers still think that local school governance is still foremost in the “hybrid governance” model of the U.S. school system (Goldring & Greenfield, 2002). However, in the wake of court school funding decisions, most states now use some sort of equalization mechanism to significantly redistribute school funds at the state level (Baker & Corcoran, 2012; Brown, 1996; Evans, Murray, & Schwab, 1998). In fact, according to data from the National Center for Education Statistics, in only 13 states do local revenues still exceed the combined state and federal support, and in 29 states, state spending alone outstrips the local contribution to school funding (Cornman, Young, & Herrell, 2012).

The growing number of “education governors” is another trend that reflects an increased state role, perhaps at the expense of local control. Finn (2011) has suggested that the first wave of education governors, prominent in the 1980’s and 90’s and including well-known names such as Lamar Alexander, Ann Richards, Bill Clinton, and Tommy Thompson, was largely made up of moderates from both parties interested in improving student outcomes through standards-based reforms. Finn (2011) contrasted these “pioneers” with the current generation of education governors, most often Republican and less moderate, including, for example, Mitch Daniels, Scott Walker, John
Kasich, and Chris Christie. “Austerity defines the era and the leadership and reform strategies of these chief executives,” Finn (2011) explained. While Finn found that the new education governors care about innovation and student outcomes, he described teacher pay and accountability as their top concerns in the current era of budgetary restraint. Similarly, Mokher (2010) found the label “education governor” to be widely used, and distinguished between governors whose education focus sought to address economic concerns and those who acted as a “key supporter of a specific educational policy” (p. 476).

As discussed above, the literature on school governance has shown an ever-increasing state and federal role, which raises important questions about the future role of school boards. However, the size, structure, and geographic setting of school districts vary so widely that school boards have proven to be an elusive area of study for the researchers who seek to describe them. School boards can be urban, suburban, or rural, and have anywhere from 3 to 22 members (Hess & Meeks, 2010). Their members are usually elected, but may be appointed. They most often receive no remuneration for their services, but some receive a salary. In California alone, district enrollments range from three students for Sierra County Office of Education to 667,251 students in the Los Angeles Unified District (“Largest & Smallest Public School Districts”). Most school board candidates do not take campaign contributions from teachers’ unions or businesses, but some do (Hess & Meeks, 2010, p. 70). What is more, the degree of autonomy states afford local school boards varies from state to state (Kirst, 1978; Wirt, 1978).
If Americans have traditionally liked local control, Vermonters would seem to love it. Vermont is one of the few states where the traditional town meeting endures, the venue where the local town and school budgets are approved each spring (Bryan, 2004). When it comes to school governance, Vermont has some of the smallest school districts in the country, and its average enrollment of 312 students per district is less than 10% of the national average of 3,382 (Education Transformation Policy Commission, 2009, p. 59). Vermont also has the lowest ratio of school board members to students, which would seem to indicate a higher degree of local participation in school governance at first glance (Cate, 2006). Wirt (1978) also found Vermont to have a relatively low degree of state control in the area of education policy, presumably leaving local boards with more autonomy. Perhaps another sign of Vermont’s independent mindset is that it was the first state to have withdrawn from the NCLB waiver process because of related federal requirements (Meyers & Rogers, 2012, p. 15).

**Problem Statement**

The purpose of this case study is to examine the changing role of school boards. Vermont, a small state with a strong tradition of local governance, represents an extreme case in an age of declining local control. The unit of analysis is the Vermont public school system, with its local education agencies (LEA), either *supervisory unions*, comprised of local districts, or incorporated *supervisory districts*, representing embedded units within the case. Vermont has neither charter schools nor mayor-managed districts, but local control in Vermont takes many shapes when we consider its inter-district choice options, variety of local governance structures, variation in LEA student enrollments, and
the recent establishment of a government appointed secretary of education to replace the previous position of a state board-appointed commissioner of education. Participating LEAs have been purposefully selected for variation by size, geographic location, and governance structure. The use of qualitative methods has provided in-depth information about the experiences of school board members in each LEA. The problem to be addressed by this study is the rapidly changing role of school boards in an age of declining local control. With its small school districts, myriad school governance structures, and history of resistance to consolidation efforts, Vermont constitutes an extreme case uniquely suited for exploring current school governance issues. In the broader context of school reform, accountability, and parental choice, the question of the school board’s role as a democratic institution remains of the utmost importance.

Research Questions

This qualitative case study examined the role of local governance in Vermont schools by exploring school board members’ perceptions and experiences of local control. The principal research question addressed is:

How do Vermont school board members perceive local control of schools?

The sub-questions are as follow:

- What are their attitudes and opinions on the role of local control?
- What differences, if any, do they discern between the widely held ideal of local control and their day-to-day experiences working on a local school board?
- In what areas of school governance do they feel they contribute the most?
• Which aspects of their work do they find to be most prescribed by state and federal requirements?

• What relationships or potential conflicts, do they see between parental control and local control?

• How do they see the future role of school boards?
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A Greatly Maligned Institution

School boards have come under fire nearly as long as they have served public education. Criticism of school boards goes back at least to Mark Twain (1899), who, to paraphrase, famously claimed they were God’s quintessential creation of idiots. Thomas (1936) faulted local control by asking what kind of transportation system we would have if each town were left to decide the level of road maintenance it could support. He argued that adequate schools were too important to be left to local decision-making and would have widespread deleterious effects, adding, “We no longer permit promiscuous disposal of sewage because of the known effect on life, not only in the specific locality but because of its contaminating effect on surrounding communities” (Thomas, 1936, p. 201).

Clearly, debates over local school boards are not a new phenomenon. Lieberman predicted the end of local control over 50 years ago, saying,

Local control of education has clearly outlived its usefulness on the American scene.

Practically, it must give way to a system of educational controls in which local communities play ceremonial rather than policy-making roles. Intellectually, it is already a corpse. (as cited in Faber, 1991, p. 2)

The literature on school boards frequently reflects this pessimistic view, and often focuses on what is not working, for example school board conflicts (Bjork, 2008; Blumberg & Blumberg, 1985; Cuban, 1976; Fusarelli, 2006; Grady & Bryant, 1991;
Mountford, 2008) and board failure to pass budgets (Ehrenberg, Ehrenberg, Smith, & Zhang, 2004). However, many authors have noted a lack of empirical evidence of effective board practices, with instead a predominance of opinion-based literature (Alsbury, 2008; Hess & Meeks, 2010; Land, 2002). While some of these criticisms are surely justified, we are left to wonder what other representative body at the municipal, state, or federal level has been held up to such withering critiques.

In addition, much of the literature on school board effectiveness concentrates on the importance of improved board member training and preparation (Cistone, 1975; Eadie, 2003; Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000; Kowalski, 2008). Despite a lack of empirical evidence as to its effectiveness (Hough, McGregor-Lowndes, & Ryan, 2004), Carver’s Policy Governance™ (1996; 2006) is often cited as a way to keep boards from micro-managing. While suggestions for improving local school governance is clearly meant to help, the advice offered up is predicated on the assumption that the school board is a broken institution, rife with dissent and dysfunction.

More recently, Gehring has claimed that school boards are “an education sinkhole that supports the status quo” (as cited in Kirst, 2008, p. 37). The claim that school boards are an impediment to innovation and school improvement has now become a common reproach advanced by proponents of school reform. While some supporters of increased centralization see local control as preventing the implementation national standards (Miller, 2009), supporters of decentralization have cited school boards as a significant obstacle to innovation, notably through market-based reforms (Brandl, 1998; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Finn, 1992b; Hassel, 1998). Finn (1992) argued that school boards are
“preservers of entrenched interests and encrusted practices” (p. 25). It is in this way that some authors have observed that school boards are squeezed from both the top and the bottom; in other words, with increasing state and federal requirements from above, and increasing demands for reform from the community below (Kirst, 1994; 2004; Petersen & Fusarelli, 2008). Only additional research will show how school board members view their new role as they navigate the coexistent countervailing forces of centralization and decentralization.

Grassroots Democracy

Another criticism of local control is that school boards are not truly representative. Some authors have argued that school boards are more likely to defend the “education bureaucracy”, teachers’ unions, or special interest groups (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Finn, 1992; Schlechty, 2008; Wohlstetter, Griffin, & Chau, 2002). Others have pointed out that, on average, school board members are more likely to be white, male, educated, and financially well off. Cistone (2008) observed, “Compared with the general public, school board members come disproportionately from groups with high social status” (p. 29). Similarly, some authors have found a disconnect between school board “elites” and the general public (Danzberger, 1994; Kirst & Wirt, 2001).

There is a clear trend, however, towards increasing diversity among school board members. Women, while still in the minority, are now represented at twice the rate they are in Congress, and are better represented on school boards than in state legislatures (Hess & Meeks, 2010). African Americans and Hispanics are more likely to serve on school boards now too, especially in urban districts (Berkman & Plutzer, 2005; Hess &
Meeks, 2010; Marschall, 2005). Recent studies have also found that influence from special interests has less impact on school board policymaking than previously believed (Berkman & Plutzer, 2005; Hess, 2008; Hess & Meeks, 2010; Moe, 2005).

Despite its many critics and imperfections, local control is still esteemed as an enduring example of grassroots democracy. Danzberger and Usdan (1992) wrote, “In many respects, local school boards are one of the last bastions of meaningful local government” (p. 92). For Lutz and Iannaccone (2008), the local school district is the “crucible of democracy” (p. 5). Bjork (2008) found that increasing transparency in education has led to more parent and community criticism of schools, but also to greater responsiveness on the part of superintendents and school boards seeking to address their concerns. Based on their findings, Berkman and Plutzer (2005) wrote, “The empirical story shows that school districts are indeed democratic. To a degree that surprised both authors of this book, there is a high correspondence between what citizens want and what they get” (p. 156). Perhaps most importantly, despite an often negative portrayal of school board issues in the media (Hess & Meeks, 2010; Tracy, 2010), the 2011 PDK/Gallup Poll on American’s Attitudes Toward Public Schools found that the public was only slightly less approving of school boards now than they were in 1984 (Bushaw & Lopez, 2011).

While low voter turnout is often cited as another shortcoming of local control of schools (Mountford, 2008), Berkman and Plutzer (2005) stressed the fact that school district budget referenda are in fact the only chance citizens have to vote directly on government taxing and spending. This distinction between direct democracy and
representative democracy was not lost on Tocqueville (1835) who observed, “The American learns about the law by participating in the making of it. He teaches himself about the forms of government by governing” (p. 352).

When we consider school boards in this light, it is hard to imagine a governmental body where the average citizen participates more directly. Of course, local control reflects representative democracy too, because school board members are elected, but school boards are still unlike any other legislative body. For example, Tracy (2010) has drawn the distinction between public hearings, typically on a single topic with “authorities” on one side and “audience” on the other, and local governance meetings which cover a range of topics, occur more often, and frequently lead to “ongoing relationships” between the citizens and their representatives (p. 65). While much of the school board literature has concentrated on urban districts, more research is needed to discern how local control is faring in smaller districts where community members are more likely to actively participate in local governance (Land, 2002).

The many studies that have examined the causes of school board conflict seem to reflect an assumption that local control is a broken institution. But for Bryan (2004), this conflict may be a mark of authenticity, what he has termed real democracy.

Real democracies come in better and worse forms. They promote both good and bad policies. They make their participants both satisfied and frustrated. "Real" does not mean "good". Real democracy is better to the extent that all who live in a jurisdiction are citizens and all citizens are eligible to participate. (p. 4)
Bryan’s description of local governance is a reminder that participatory democracy is, by its very nature, a little messier than Congress and state legislatures, its more august siblings. Along the same lines, Tracy (2010) has coined the term *ordinary democracy* to describe the workings of local governance and the exchanges it engenders. “Although theorists disagree about how to define democracy, almost everyone agrees that school board meetings are places where it *should* be happening,” she wrote (p. 4). Her 35-month descriptive case study of the Boulder Valley School District used discourse analysis strategies to follow how its school board brokered dissent and opposition.

While voter turnout for school board elections is often lower than those for state or national candidates (Land, 2002), this may not be the best measure of how democratic school boards are either. Many authors have examined *responsiveness* as a factor in the extent to which school boards are democratic. Resnick and Bryant (2010) describe school board members’ accessibility and proximity to their voters in this way,

> School boards have a long history as a cornerstone of democracy. Attend any school board meeting and you’ll see communities having their say. Board members take their work home—and to grocery stores, soccer games, and gas stations—because they’re never off duty. They can’t be—they live in the communities where they serve, allowing for easy access and input from those who put them into office. (p. 13)

With their *dissatisfaction theory* of governance, Lutz and Iannaccone (2008) have observed that voter turnout for school board elections increases exactly when it needs to: when the community no longer feels its school board is addressing their concerns,
tensions rise, and voters turn out in greater numbers to vote out the incumbent board members. This, in turn, often leads to superintendent turnover, a new direction in school leadership, and eventually a period of quiescence until the cycle repeats. In this way, the authors found that “citizens can change local education policy and obtain the level of education they choose and are willing to support” (Lutz & Iannaccone, 2008, p. 21).

So while the question of whether our institutions live up to their democratic intent will certainly persist, it is fair to say that, by many measures, school boards are in fact democratic institutions. While turnout for board elections is often low, school boards would appear to be relatively responsive and accessible to those they represent. Finally, it should be noted that, like the traditional New England town meeting, school board meetings and referenda are one of the last examples of direct democracy.

The literature on school boards appears to show that local control of schools has been restricted by ever-increasing state and federal roles. We can also observe that, despite long-running and strong criticism, school boards endure as a democratic institution in an age of voter alienation and disillusionment with government. Clearly, local control of schools is a complicated issue with strong opinions both for and against. However, a close look at the empirical research reveals considerable limitations on what we know about how school boards function in the complex system of American school governance, and in particular in smaller, rural districts.

A Black Box

Neal Peirce, a contributing editor at The National Review, said that school boards are a “dark island of American governance, the institution that everyone knows of but
that few understand” (cited in Danzberger et al., 1987, p. 53). Researchers have given considerable attention to school board characteristics (Carol et al., 1986; Feistritzer, 1992; Hess & Meeks, 2010; Marschall, 2005; Meier & Juenke, 2005), turnover (Brudney & Murray, 1998; Carol et al., 1986; Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000), micropolitics (Bjork, 2008; Boyd, 1975; Petersen & Fusarelli, 2008; Taft-Blakely, 2007), and responsiveness (Berkman & Plutzer, 2005; Jennings, 1975; Wirt, 1975), and most recently research has begun to address school boards’ effect on student learning (Alsbury, 2008b; Land, 2002; Stringfield, 2008).

However, few if any studies exist which describe what Alsbury (2008b) called the “indecipherable mosaic” (p. 41) of political structures that influence school boards. In rapidly changing times, additional research is needed to better understand how school boards simultaneously navigate the demands of state and federal requirements, challenges from school reformers, and the desires of parents and community members. Tracy (2010) observed that much of the literature has examined boards as educational institutions, offered advice on board effectiveness, or focused on superintendent-board relations, but that few authors have analyzed how school boards function as political institutions which interact with other levels of government.

In order to understand the role school boards should play in the coming years, we will need to better understand how they function as the “linchpin of the local governance structure” (Usdan, 2010, p. 9). In an age of diminished local control, the role school boards play in mediating between complex governing structures and the demands of their voters is of the utmost importance in order to anticipate the changes still to come in
American public education. Fuhrman and Elmore (1990) recognized the complexity of the local-state control question when they wrote, “Conventional wisdom about state control of education suffers from three confusions: confusing activity with control, confusing control with influence, and generalizing too broadly about state influence on local discretion” (p. 89). Clearly, we can see that the reality of local control is more complicated than simply analyzing state and federal policies, school board characteristics, or election turnout rates.

Local control may be so culturally ingrained that we may no longer question what we mean, exactly when we refer to local control. Birkland (2010) defines a black box as “the part of any system model or theory that just assumes its operation without explaining how that part of the system translates inputs into outputs” (p. 27). Local control may be such a well-loved idea that we may not often examine how it functions as a policy paradigm in education today. It is for this reason that only a constructionist approach can critically examine the semiotic value (De Saussure, 2011) of local control and also explore whether school board members’ ideas of local control contrast with their day-to-day experience of local control. “No aspects of knowledge are purely from the external world, devoid of human construction,” Stake observed (1995, p. 100). This case study of Vermont school governance addressed the need to understand how school board members perceive the role they play in the institution of local control of schools.

Local Control in Vermont

In 1770, even before Vermont acquired its French-sounding name, the place already had a mind of its own. Ethan Allen, who would become the State’s greatest hero,
famously stood up to New York’s Attorney General John Tabor Kempe who had come to bribe the Vermonter into supporting New Yorkers’ claims on the territory. When Kempe said he had might on his side, Allen famously replied, “Sir, the gods of the hills are not the gods of the valleys,” (Randall, 2011, pp. 236-7) The menace in Allen’s demeanor convinced the New Yorker to leave well enough alone.

Of course, along with California, Hawaii, and Texas, Vermont is one of only four states to have been a republic before joining the Union, and its long tradition of autonomy may owe something to its fiercely defended independence in those early years. In the same way, Vermont’s Republican Senator George Aiken’s early opposition to the Vietnam War is legendary, and Senator James Jeffords shocked the country when he left the Republican Party in 2001 because its members refused to fund fully the American with Disabilities Act. He cost the Republicans their Senate majority, but he stood by his principles.

As further evidence of Vermonters’ independent thinking, Bryan (2004) cited a long list of Vermont “firsts” – first American constitution to abolish slavery, first female lieutenant governor, first school of higher education for women, first woman to argue a case before the Supreme Court, first African American state legislator, first African American college graduate, and first state to grant the rights and privileges of marriage to gay and lesbian couples through the status of civil union.

Bryan (2004) also emphasized that, historically, Vermonters have “participated more fully at the state level than the great majority of Americans in other states” (p. 290), and that only New Hampshire elects more state legislators per capita than Vermont.
Taken together, these characteristics show Vermont to be an ideal setting to examine the question of local school governance.

Without speaking of Vermont exceptionalism in the same way that some historians refer to the U.S.’s national character as being forged by unique events and circumstances, we can still observe that Vermont has been shaped by its geography, history, and traditions of self-government. With its long tradition of small communities, democratic participation, and independent thinking, “local control” is a term that resonates deeply with Vermont voters. Every first Tuesday in March, constituents still turn out to vote on the local school budget on Town Meeting Day, a 200 year old institution. A recent gubernatorial candidate from the Vermont secession movement ran largely on a platform of bringing local control back to Vermont schools (Steele, 2010). Despite perennial consolidation proposals, few, if any, Vermont politicians ever take a position against local control. Used together, these two words evoke an ideal of “democracy on a human scale” (Bryan & McClaughry, 1990), or as Bryan (2004) puts it, “It is like springtime. It is a longing,” (p. 54). But in an age of increased federal and state requirements and funding, governance consolidation, and school choice options, we are left to wonder if local control is more of an ideal from another era than a reality in the day-to-day workings of Vermont local school governance.

Since Vermont has more school districts than it does places—273 to its 255 cities, towns, gores, and unincorporated areas (VT AOE Budget Book)—on the face of things, it might appear to have a relatively high degree of local control. And with Vermont’s 1,442 elected school board members for 88,816 students (VT AOE Budget Book)—or nearly 1
school board member for every 61 students\(^1\)—the state’s school governance structure seems to reflect a predilection for grassroots decision-making, as opposed to statewide education bureaucracies. While discussing school consolidation efforts recently, former Vermont superintendent and researcher William Mathis seemed to express this sentiment, saying, “The larger your school and the further away it becomes, the greater the risk you run of alienating students and alienating the community,” (Harsha, 2009, para. 4).

In fact, local control is something of a sacred cow to Vermonter. In 1892, when Act 20 abolished the “district school” system, whereby each school constituted a district, approximately 2,500 school districts were merged into 246 town and 33 incorporated school districts (Richardson, 1994, p. 21). Vermonters resented this consolidation of their schools so much that they came to refer to the law as “The Vicious Acts of ’92” (McLaughry, 2010).

Since then, further consolidation attempts have met with little success. In his analysis of five Vermont governance studies dating from 1914 to 1987, Richardson (1994) found that the authors’ calls for consolidation went unheeded because they represented “elites” who sought to replicate governance structures from more urban settings and failed to take into account the “particular context of Vermont” (p. 167). Mathis (2015, para. 15) observed that historically Vermont State Commissioners of Education have often resigned, or were asked to resign, when they pushed too hard for consolidation of school districts.

More recently, in response to Act 60, Vermont’s school finance equalization law,

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\(^1\) Since supervisory union board members also serve on their local district board, some of the 1,442 Vermont Board members are in fact the same people counted twice.
residents of the small town of Killington voted to secede from Vermont and join New Hampshire at their annual town meeting (Zezima, 2004). Most recently, North Bennington residents sought state approval to obtain independent status for their local elementary school to prevent its merger with another school (Banchero, 2013). While local control of schools may be a cherished ideal for many Americans, in the minds of Vermonters it would appear to be sacrosanct.

And yet, like elsewhere, all three branches of the Vermont State Government have steadily asserted more control of school governance at the expense of local control. In Brigham v. Board of Education of 1997, the Vermont Supreme Court found the state school funding system to be unconstitutional. This court decision in turn led the legislature to pass Act 60, “The Equal Educational Opportunity Act”, later that year and Act 68 in 2003 to establish finance equalization mechanisms to decrease disparities in school spending. As shown in Figure 1, Act 60 had the effect of greatly increasing the state share of spending after its passage. It has been argued that since the passage of Act 68 in 2003, local governments effectively collect a state education tax that is redistributed across municipalities through the statewide funding system.
The Vermont Policy Environment

In addition to equalizing school funding through a statewide education funding system in response to *Brigham v. Board of Education*, the Vermont Legislature has also passed several new laws in recent years that have changed the educational landscape and have major implications for school governance as well as the idea of local control of schools. Most recently, and oftentimes working together, the Vermont Legislature, Governor Shumlin, and Secretary of Education Rebecca Holcombe have set a clear policy agenda to streamline school governance, improve opportunities for all Vermont students, and encourage financial efficiency whenever possible.

The passage of Act 153 in 2010 created financial incentives for local districts willing to join a Regional Educational District (RED). The law supported *voluntary*
mergers] between districts through financial incentives, unlike former Commissioner Cate’s call for a statewide consolidation to reduce the number of districts from 284 to 63 in one fell swoop (2006, p. 11). While the law represented a much more gradual approach than the previous redistricting proposal to create either 13 or 20 REDs statewide (Education Transformation Policy Commission, 2009), it nonetheless required consolidation of services across the state. In the end, Act 153’s greatest impact may have been reassigning the important duties to supervisory unions, instead of leaving them at the discretion of local school districts – negotiating teacher and administrator contracts, overseeing curriculum and distribution of federal grant funds, and providing technology, transportation, special education services, were all responsibilities transferred to the supervisory union in order to improve efficiency and cost savings (Act 153, 2010, pp. 16-19).

Act 98 of 2012 codified a stronger school governance role for the state executive branch by establishing the Vermont Agency of Education and the cabinet position of Secretary of Education to replace that of State Commissioner, formerly elected by the State Board of Education. Vermont Governor Shumlin explained that the new Agency of Education would now be “no different from any other department or agency” and that “the secretary will be directly accountable to the governor so, in the end, the governor is responsible for education policy in Vermont, and I think that’s the way it should be” (Johnson, 2012). With the Education General Fund making up nearly a third of the state budget (Vermont Legislative Joint Fiscal Office, 2017), it is only natural that the Governor should want to exert greater influence over Vermont public school policy.
Act 77 of 2013 required schools to implement and maintain a personalized learning process for all Grade 7-12 students to “increase the rates of secondary school completion and postsecondary continuation in Vermont” (Act 77, 2013, Sec. 1). The new law called on secondary schools to provide for flexible pathways to graduation, including but not limited to internships and work-based learning, virtual and blended learning, dual enrollment, and early college programs. Act 77 has spurred a significant shift, still underway, towards personalizing curriculum in Vermont schools and has greatly influenced budget and program decisions, notably in the areas of community partnerships, learner management systems, teacher advisory, formal parental participation in goal-setting, student-led conferences, and exhibitions of learning.

When the Vermont Agency of Education updated Rule 2000 with the new Educational Quality Standards of 2014, it had the power of statute and required districts to use evidence of proficiency to graduate high school students, instead of traditional Carnegie units, by 2020 (Educational Quality Standards, 2014, p. 7). It is important to note that the requirement that all schools change their curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices to a proficiency-based system may constitute the single biggest education reform in Vermont in recent memory. While the Educational Quality Standards allowed districts to develop their own curriculum, reporting, and verification structures locally, they nonetheless represent a major state education mandate with sweeping consequences for the way districts organize and run their schools.

In the same year, Governor Shumlin signed into law Act 166, which required districts to provide 10 hours per week of publicly funded prekindergarten for all children
between the ages of three and five. Citing behavioral and neuroscience research about early learning, Governor Shumlin took a strong position in favor of the new law. Approximately 80% of districts in the state provided prekindergarten before Act 166 took effect (Albright, 2014).

Finally, and most important for school governance, the Legislature passed Act 46 in 2015, a new law that sought to “maximize operational efficiencies” and “promote transparency and accountability, delivered at a cost that parents, voters, and taxpayers value” (Act 46, 2015, p. 4). Citing Vermont’s 13 different types of school district governance structures, the law claimed that “…elementary and secondary education in Vermont lacks cohesive governance and delivery systems” and that many school districts, therefore, “are not well-suited to achieve economies of scale” (p. 2). Consequently, the law established the preferred governance model as a prekindergarten–Grade 12 supervisory district with an average daily membership of 900 students (p. 7).

Like its predecessor Act 53, Act 46 provided financial incentives for districts to pursue voluntary mergers, but it also set the deadline of July 1, 2019 for local districts to conduct merger studies and find their own solutions. At that time, the Vermont Secretary of Education will review the resulting districts and determine whether they represent sustainable governance structures and are capable of providing equitable opportunities for all students as outlined in the Vermont Educational Quality Standards. Aside from its clear and looming deadline, Act 46 is perhaps most novel in its approach by positing that overly complex school governance structures are not only inefficient and inexpensive, but also fail to provide “substantial equity in the quality and variety of educational opportunities” (p. 3) across Vermont’s many small school districts. It is perhaps due to the many failed
consolidation attempts in Vermont history that Act 46 supporters have sought to change the related discourse by preferring the term *unification* to describe the reforms underway to talk of *consolidation*.

With Vermont’s strongly held tradition of local governance, the current changes taking place require new research to better understand what remains of local control as an institution. The Vermont Supreme Court’s decision in *Brigham v. Board of Education* has led to a state-equalized school funding system. Governor Shumlin has staked a strong claim to leading state education policy and centralized decision-making power through the creation of the cabinet-level position of Secretary of Education to lead the Agency of Education and take public positions on legislation. Secretary Holcombe has led an ambitious education agenda through the adoption of the Educational Quality Standards and its related statewide accountability model, the Educational Quality Review process. The Legislature has redefined curriculum across the state through Act 77’s flexible pathways and personalized learning plans, and continued governance reform efforts through Acts 153 and 46. These reforms, as well as Vermont’s complex local governance structures, make Vermont a unique setting to further investigate the issue of local control of schools.

Few would argue with the fact that public education is a crucial institution in American democracy. This may explain why recent decades have seen an ever-increasing state and federal role in education. Still, despite strong criticisms, school boards endure as a uniquely American embodiment of local governance. However, the longstanding institution of local control is presently under pressure from two different
directions, namely *centralization* from higher levels of government, and *decentralization* from the proponents of market-based reforms who would expand parental control over education, which in some cases would supersede or circumvent local school governance structures.

The Vermont context provides unique opportunities to explore the question of local school governance. First, studies of small and rural districts have received insufficient attention in school board literature. It should also be noted that the variety of Vermont school governance structures and the enduring cultural tradition of local control is unique. Second, while there exist studies of rural school boards, these are most often through the lens of organizational dysfunction or simply examine the school board as a closed system without much attention paid to how school boards mediate between their constituents and other governmental structures that affect educational finance and policy. Third, Vermont’s educational system is currently undergoing major changes, which will have a significant impact on local control of schools, notably, the ongoing process of district unification through Act 46, and sweeping quality reforms led by the newly created Secretary of Education and Agency of Education. The Vermont case study of local school governance that follows, with intentionally selected local school boards representing embedded units, seeks to provide important insights in an age of rapid change in U.S. public schools.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Rationale

The purpose of this case study is to examine school board members’ perceptions of local control in a time of increasing state and federal role on the one hand, and increasing demands for parental choice on the other. The literature on school boards tend to focus on urban districts (Land, 2002), which may or may not apply to smaller, suburban and rural districts. Some authors have examined school board conflict, responsiveness, and effectiveness (Bjork, 2008; Cistone, 1975b; Mountford, 2008); however, most often at the micro level or by means of large quantitative studies that encompass considerable variation in board characteristics, geographical setting, and political context (Carol et al., 1986; Hess & Meeks, 2010). This study has examined local control through the lens of school board members who occupy a “crucial place in the complex array of social and intergovernmental structures” (Russo, 1992, p. 9).

Influenced by different branches and levels of government, and in close proximity to voters, the local school board is an institution that occupies a unique locus of democratic activity. The goal of the study is to inform the current educational discourse by unpacking the policy paradigm of local control of schools from the perspective of those who exercise it, namely, local school board members.

This study has been designed to examine Vermont as a single case with school districts treated as embedded units. Yin (2008) explains the advantages to the approach in this way, “Within the case study may still be incorporated subunits of analysis, so that a more complex—or embedded—design is developed. The subunits can often add
significant opportunities for extensive analysis, enhancing the insights into the single case” (2008, p. 52). In the same way, this study seeks to better examine the single case represented by Vermont school governance by comparing and contrasting perceptions and experiences of local control across a wide range of governance structures. Seen in this light, Vermont can be said to represent an extreme case, which could illuminate questions of local control elsewhere in the US.

Baxter and Jack explained that case study is “useful for evidence-informed decision-making in both clinical and policy realms” (2008, p. 544) and it is important to note that local control is often cited as a concern in educational policy decision-making, even in the current context of increasing state and federal control. An accurate portrait of local governance in a state undergoing governance reform would be valuable to better understand the frequently cited, but poorly understood, institution of local control as it exists today.

Yin (2008) stated that, “The distinctive need for case studies arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena…[and] the case study method allows investigators to retain holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (p. 4). This is significant when we consider that school boards operate at the nexus of state, federal, and citizen demands. In addition, our historical understanding of local control may in fact, be at odds with the current realities experienced by school board members.

Stake (1995) explained, “Issues are not simple and clean, but intricately wired to political, social, historical, and especially personal contexts. All these meanings are important in studying cases” (p. 17). This would seem to be an apt description of a study
of local control in Vermont school districts, and another reason for choosing case study as a methodology. The research design is meant to explore more deeply the meaning of local control in Vermont today, taking great care to enable participants to tell their stories through close collaboration with the researcher (Miller & Crabtree, 1999; Patton, 2002).

To explore the diverse experiences of school board members in their own words, in their unique local contexts, qualitative inquiry is most appropriate for investigating the research questions listed above (Patton, 2002). Specifically, I have examined perceptions of local control by means of case study methodology. At a time when some states are experimenting with site-based management, a study of the day-to-day role school boards play in small school districts is of the utmost importance. For even as state and federal influence continues to grow, these board members can provide a clearer vision of school governance at the grassroots level.

Stake (1978) emphasized the importance of clearly “bounding” a case. The unit of study for this research is the State of Vermont’s school governance system, with special attention paid to local governance. The four local school boards constitute embedded units and provide a range of unique contexts within the statewide case study. Thomas (2011) contrasted the single case study with embedded or “nested” units with the multiple case study in this way: “A nested study is distinct from a straightforwardly multiple study in that it gains its integrity, its wholeness, from the wider case” (p. 517). In the same way that Thomas suggested that wards in a hospital represent nested units, the four school boards examined here represent embedded units in the single case study of Vermont school governance.
The case study is based on interviews of 19 Vermont school board members across four different districts, and 11 interviews of superintendents and policy experts to provide triangulation of the data. The study also consulted local and state documents relevant to local control of schools to establish the context of each case subunit.

**Sampling**

Purposeful sampling has been used to select school districts to reflect a range of existing governance and geographical settings within the Vermont case study. Flyvbjerg (2006, p. 348) describes this strategy as *information-oriented selection* as it relates to maximum variation cases, and Patton (2002) as *maximum variation sampling* (p. 243). The four school districts selected for this Vermont case study represent a range of characteristics as defined by geography, student population, and governance structure. The sampling purposefully excluded extreme cases that could be considered outliers in the Vermont governance context, such as inter-state districts, tech center districts, or joint contract districts. Each of these structures have unique attributes that deserve special attention, which, in turn, would limit the value of district comparisons as embedded units in the case study. By the same reasoning, the sample only includes supervisory unions or incorporated supervisory districts at the level of LEA as the embedded units of study. While some interviewees also serve on a *local district* school board (i.e., town or unified district within a supervisory union), this study’s embedded units are bounded at the level of supervisory union or supervisory district.

A minimum of four school board members have been interviewed from each participating district in order to provide a range of perspectives within each embedded
unit. Each district’s Board Chair and Superintendent were also interviewed. At both the
unit and subunit level, this study has emphasized a maximum variation sampling strategy
in order to better examine recurring patterns and important differences found in the data
across local settings. The four supervisory unions or supervisory district school boards,
as embedded units of study have been chosen on the basis of their demographic
composition, governance structure, size, and location, with the purposeful sample
representing a range of structures from around the state, while at the same time excluding
districts that would be outliers as defined by any of these criteria. At the subunit level,
participants were selected by using a chain selection method, recommended by Patton
(2002) to “find people who know people who know good examples for study” (p. 243)
starting with the superintendent, who, in turn, recommended school board members for
participation in the study.

Access and Researcher Role

Since Vermont is a small state, the problem of access posed fewer challenges than
if this study were conducted elsewhere. In my current position, I have frequent contact
with superintendents, school board members, policymakers, members of the State Board
of Education, and even the Vermont Secretary of Education. In addition, my status as a
doctoral candidate at Vermont’s largest university likely provided credibility for my role
as a researcher— and possibly without the concerns of politicization that a researcher
from a private policy institute or government-commissioned study could cause. It is
equally important that this exploratory study does not seek to prove or disprove a
hypothesis about local control, nor support either side of the lively school consolidation
debate.

Still, it is easy for researchers to find the importance of their studies more meaningful than do members of the general public. In light of this, it was important to emphasize to participants that their voices are important, that their work on school boards makes a difference, and that this study seeks to influence the current local control discourse thanks to their contributions.

For a case study such as this one, access to important data has become much easier to retrieve because of online availability. There also seems to be an ever-growing expectation for transparency at all levels of government that parallels our burgeoning use of technology. The Freedom of Information Act and other public records laws have given researchers much more access to official documents and data that would have required site visits is now readily available online. For example, as part of the document review, I have examined school board meeting minutes, district action plans, merger reports, press articles, and even school board meetings taped, broadcast, and archived by the Regional Education Network. Researchers have ready access to quantities of information that our predecessors could only dream of. The greater challenge for the contemporary researcher may, in fact, be the sheer amount of information, as well as its ever-changing quality now. In the last century, information published in print was rarer, but also more formal. The dynamic nature of how information is shared electronically now poses several challenges, including that of sifting through out-of-date webpages and draft documents in order to identify the final resolution of a deliberative process and establish the current state of affairs.
Reciprocity, Trust, and Rapport

Patton (2002) describes the importance of trust and rapport and insists that access is rarely granted automatically, but rather only after investigators negotiate with gatekeepers (pp. 310-11). The Vermont board members, board chairs, and superintendents exhibited a great deal of transparency and welcomed the chance to discuss their work in their school communities. What is more, they demonstrated a willingness to discuss issues openly and generously opened up their schedules in order to participate. While this study is not an evaluation, it was important to carefully present to participants the significance of the study and the ethical rules that underpin it. A participatory approach was emphasized, whereby researcher and participants collaborated closely to construct new knowledge. It goes without saying that an empathetic interview approach that strengthened trust and rapport led to the best results.

Personal Bias and the Subjective “I”

Since qualitative research recognizes the subjectivity of the researcher, the question of researcher bias is important to acknowledge (Patton, 2002). There are several sources of potential bias, as it relates to my role as principal investigator, that need to be recognized.

First, as a multi-generational Vermonter, I may be naturally more inclined to find local control more desirable. After all, like many Vermonters I value community, and I tend to prefer local institutions that seem to be on a human scale, especially when compared to governance structures in bigger states. On the other hand, as someone who has lived in Europe and maintains strong connections to France, where the national
school system is much more centralized, I sometimes wonder why the US is the only industrialized nation without a national curriculum.

Along the same lines, as a teacher I have come to believe that U.S. schools are subjected more often, paradoxically, to standardized testing precisely due to the lack of a national curriculum or widely adopted standards. On another note, as a teacher, I have also experienced intense contract negotiations with school boards that sometimes seemed to reflect some anti-teacher animus. In my new role an administrator, I have heard colleagues despair of school board internal conflict or over-reach into the operations and management of schools. It was important for me to acknowledge and reflect on these potential biases before beginning my field research and interviews with board members, board chairs, superintendents, and other policymakers.

**Ethical & Political Considerations**

Public school policy is often politically charged and Vermont is no exception. In a state that values its town meetings, local products, and local culture, Vermonters from a range of political perspectives often seem to oppose the increasing federal role in education. With the enactment of Acts 153 and 46 relating to governance, Act 77 and 166 requiring flexible pathways to graduation and universal prekindergarten, the Educational Quality Standards’ mandate of proficiency-based graduation, and the newly established position of Vermont Secretary of Education, some school boards may feel besieged by a sustained statewide push for more equitable opportunities across districts and consistency in school governance. At the same time, other participants have made clear their desire for common-sense reforms in Vermont schools governance. Home-
schooling (Picard, 2012), school choice (School Choice Forum, 1999), and other governance issues (Carapezza, 2012, June 6) frequently provoke hot debates here in Vermont, so controversial statements, if attributed to board members, board chairs, or superintendents, could have significant consequences. This is why it was of the utmost importance for participants to know that their anonymity is protected and how the data was maintained, archived, and protected.

Pseudonyms have been used for supervisory unions and supervisory districts to prevent them from being identified, and I refer to participants only by their respective roles for the same reason. All interviews have been recorded and professionally transcribed. All recordings were then destroyed in order to protect participant anonymity. All identifying information has been maintained in a secure location online protected by encryption. At no time was any identifiable information about participants left on a desktop, laptop, hard-drive or other device, which can be lost or accessed by others.

Data Collection Methods

Since case study represents “analyses of persons, events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions, or other systems that are studied holistically by one or more methods” (Thomas, 2011, p. 513), the purpose of the data collection strategies described below is to obtain a detailed portrait of local control through the case study of Vermont school board governance.

For each of the four sites, the data comes from three main sources: school board interviews, superintendent interviews, and document review. The interviews were conducted face to face in order to build rapport and also to provide better opportunities
for clarification and probing. After the purposeful selection of participating school districts, at least five participants were interviewed at each site, including the board chair, board members, and the superintendent each time. As a way to develop a rich portrait of each local district’s unique context, the documents reviewed included, but were not limited to, action plans and reports, annual budgets, local news articles, state legislation, and supporting documents from the Vermont Agency of Education, the Vermont Superintendents Association, and the Vermont School Boards Association.

**Interview Strategy**

Each interview included two distinct parts: a series of visual prompts to elicit open-ended responses (Appendix A) and a series of standardized open-ended questions (Appendix B). All interviews were conducted in person, with three exceptions where, to overcome logistical challenges, the same interviews were conducted via email. All participants agreed to be recorded with the understanding that the recorded interview would be destroyed once it was transcribed. All interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, allowing for time for follow-up questions from the interviewer and for participants to elaborate and explore questions in a meaningful way.

Each in-person interview started with a series five visual prompts (Appendix A) intended to elicit responses related to local governance, the state role in school governance, the federal role in school governance, the statewide funding system, and the parental role in education, respectively. The use of visual research methods has become increasingly common in qualitative research (Epstein et al., 2006; Margolis & Pauwels, 2012), and many researchers have claimed that the approach builds rapport between
researcher and participants (Epstein, et al., 2007; Gold, 2007; Liebenberg 2009). Schwartz (1989) has used photography in a similar approach as a way to foster participant openness and reflexivity. In addition, Liebenberg (2009) found that, “Understanding the multiple meanings of images offers the opportunity to reformulate the relationship between researcher and participant into a more mutual initiative” (p. 445).

Finally, the purpose of using image-based interview prompts to begin the interview serves a clear and simple purpose for this study. Given the cultural weight and charged nature of the expression “local control” in school governance discourse, opening the interview in this way prevented the researcher’s questions from overly shaping the participant’s responses at the outset. For as Roland Barthes (2007) puts it, “…language is never innocent: words have a second-order memory which mysteriously persists in the midst of new meanings,” (p. 16). While images can also be value-laden, and my selection of images admittedly shaped participants’ thinking, at the very least, starting interviews with image-based prompts served to strip away loaded language and create a more open and participatory interview, notably, by not putting words into the interviewee’s mouth, or framing the issue before the participant has started to share perceptions, opinions, and experiences. Stone (1997) has described the importance of symbols in the definition of policy problems. For this study, participants’ reactions to imaged-based interview prompts helped to deconstruct local control as a powerful policy paradigm.

The second part of each interview is based on a standardized set of 13 questions
(Appendix B) that are more explicit in nature and seek to solicit concrete examples of how interviewees experience local control, or lack of it, in their work serving Vermont school boards. The questions follow a general hourglass approach, starting broadly by asking the first words that come to mind when thinking of “local control”, then eliciting perceptions of the state and federal roles in governance, and then delving into more specific aspects of their experience as board members, and finally ending in broad terms by inviting interviewees to offer anything else that they would like to contribute about their experiences and perspectives.

Using a common set of questions provided a consistent means to examine key questions about school governance across varied local contexts, for example, perceived accomplishments, shared frustrations, or commonly held values relating to local school governance. This allowed themes to emerge across interviews more clearly, and permitted comparisons across LEAs, which are the embedded units of the Vermont case.

Data Analysis

As a qualitative study, the findings here are not generalizable, but hopefully still provide new insights to our understanding of the current state of local control of schools. The interview strategy provided the opportunity for participants to share their individual voices by exploring questions in an in-depth manner. This approach generated a significant amount of data to analyze, including transcribed text over 30 hours of participant interviews. Interviews with superintendents and state policymakers allowed for triangulation of the data, as did documents collected from other sources, including but not limited to local action and merger plans, state reports, and press articles.
To begin, the entire verbatim text of all interviews was entered into an electronic document for coding purposes. For the initial coding of interviews, participant comments were connected to case study’s six research questions. Each comment was also tagged to reflect the participant’s role and site (e.g., Southern District, Board Chair). This first round of coding established a basic frame of reference to allow for cross-analysis of the embedded units of the case (i.e., LEAs).

As common themes became salient through subsequent coding they were also tagged in the data. The recurring nature of themes relating to the research questions indicated that saturation had been achieved. Beyond the study’s research questions, the use of multiple tags on a single text passage provided flexibility in analysis and permitted recurring themes to emerge as categories without forcing data prematurely into groupings. After the initial coding and category development, the data was sorted into groups and organized thematically through concept mapping. Data from different sources, including participants from the same site and documents from various sources (e.g., LEA, state agency, media) was triangulated to ensure trustworthiness.

**Procedures to Address Trustworthiness and Credibility**

Lincoln and Guba emphasized the importance of “trustworthiness” in constructivist inquiry and suggested a new criteria to meet this standard, notably “credibility as an analog to internal validity, transferability as an analog to external validity, dependability as an analog to reliability, and confirmability as an analog to objectivity” (as cited in Patton, 2001, p. 546).
Patton (2001) emphasized the importance of “intellectual rigor, professional integrity, and methodological competence” (p. 572) as the key characteristics to a researcher’s credibility, and I will seek to do my personal best in each of these categories over the course of the study. As an experienced teacher and educational leader, I have a deep ethical commitment to the field of education, and as a doctoral candidate, I have tried to apply my academic background and growing skills as a researcher to meet the challenges of a statewide study.

Over the course of my field research, data analysis, and writing have also spent considerable time thinking about my own biases, values, and social identity as a filter—and possible obstacle—in interpreting the data. As a check against personal bias, I have maintained a dissertation journal to reflect on my role as a researcher, and above all, I have sought to respect the perspectives and voices of the study’s participants.

In addition, I have compared data throughout the process as a way to analyze themes rigorously from different sources as they emerge. As I recoded data to connect the important ideas that emerged, I worked to build findings from the participants’ views and avoided imposing any foregone conclusions. I have used member-checking to verify the accuracy of the data and findings as I coded and mapped themes, first by sharing interview transcripts with participants, and later by sharing early drafts of my work before it was finalized. I have also used triangulation as a way to check the reliability of the data collected, notably through document review, board meeting observations, and cross-checking accounts from interviews.
Finally, the use of thick description (Patton, 2002) provides credibility for this study. By deeply investigating each site, and by taking the time to invite participants to fully develop their thinking and share their experiences in their own words, I hope to have provided a detailed depiction of each of the case study’s subunits. This in-depth description will, in turn, contribute to establishing an authentic portrait of local school governance in Vermont.
CHAPTER 4: THE VERMONT CASE AND DISTRICT PROFILES

The Vermont Case

Local control of schools is a sacred cow in the Vermont policy context; it is a cherished ideal charged with historical and cultural meaning. In order to analyze board members’ perceptions and perspectives on local control, it is important to establish first, the statewide context, and then the unique attributes of each of the local settings that make up this portrait of local control of schools in Vermont. In this chapter, I will first examine the factors that have largely defined the Vermont educational policy environment, namely, a longstanding commitment to progressive education, a deeply valued local tradition of local governance, and the current governance reforms that have started to influence how Vermonter define local control in the 21st Century. In the section that follows, I will describe the local context of each of the four districts in order to establish the local environmental characteristics as defined by geography, economy, student demographics, and governance structure. Each district has unique attributes and a distinct local environment, which, taken together, form a composite portrait of local control of schools in Vermont.

When it comes to school governance, two major forces largely define the Vermont case: a longstanding commitment to quality education and an abiding attachment to local control. Vermont is notable for its long history of support for education and its longstanding commitment to educating children, oftentimes through reforms that come later to other states. At the same time, Vermont has been slow to reform school governance structures, perhaps reflecting the character of its many close-
knit, rural communities and their ongoing preference for local control. For researcher, former superintendent, and Vermont State Board of Education member William Mathis, “Local governance and towns’ identification with their schools has been the most prominent and, historically, the most jealously defended feature of Vermont’s education system” (1996, p. 8).

Commitment to Progressive Education

Vermont has often found itself at the forefront of reforms to improve public education. In the 1760’s and 1770’s, even before Vermont officially existed, its towns raised money to build schools (Cross, 1992). The Vermont Constitution of 1777 was the first to require a public education system from primary school to university. A 1795 law required schools to be in session for at least two months to be eligible for public funding, and a 1797 law established a minimum curriculum for common schools. In 1823, the Rev. Samuel Hall founded in Concord the first school for teacher training in the US, and also first used blackboards in the classroom (Stone, 1935). With the creation of its first state board of education in 1827, Vermont was only the third state in the nation to establish a system of supervision of public schools (Cross, 1992). In 1867, Vermont was the second state to pass a compulsory attendance law (Stone, 1935). In 1892, Vermont was the second state to offer public kindergarten instruction (Stone, 1935). It is worth noting that Vermont is also the native state of Justin Morrill, sponsor of the Land Grant College Act of 1862, and the philosopher John Dewey, whose work still shapes progressive educational reforms today.
More recently, the *Vermont Design for Education* (1968) set out a progressive philosophy for Vermont schools by emphasizing individualization, community connections, experiential learning, and respect for learners’ unique differences. In 1973, the Vermont State Board of Education created a plan to “provide children with handicaps the needed educational staff and resources to ensure a free public education” (Cross, 1992, p. 97). In 1976, the Vermont Basic Competencies Program (Biennial Report, 1972-74) established mandatory standards for all students. In 1997, the Vermont Supreme Court found that the state funding system, “…with its substantial dependence on local property taxes and resultant wide disparities in revenues available to local school districts, deprives children of an equal educational opportunity in violation of the Vermont Constitution” (Brigham v. State, 1997). This decision led to the passage of Act 60 the same year, which resulted in a “…statewide, uniform, and equitable property tax for all” (Mathis, 2000, p. 3). Senator Jim Jeffords was a national champion of the Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1990, even leaving the Republican Party in protest in 2001 when it was not fully funded (Weber, 2014, para. 6). In 2013, Vermont required schools to create and support personalized learning plans for all 7th through 12th graders to provide flexible pathways to high school graduation. In 2014, a new law established financial support for a free universal pre-kindergarten from the state education fund. The Educational Quality Standards of the same year required high schools to graduate students based on evidence of proficiency in content areas and transferable skills, instead of awarding diplomas for course completion as measure by traditional Carnegie units. Taken together, these reforms reflect Vermonters’ longstanding commitment to public
education and an ethos of continuous improvement for public schools. Time and again the state has led progressive-minded reforms to ensure high-quality, equitable educational opportunities for all students.

**Local Governance Tradition**

However, while Vermont has often been in the vanguard of educational reform in many domains, the state has been slow to reform its school governance structures. The Vermont historian John Huden described it as “…marked by fits, starts, pauses, and jerks” (1944, in Richardson, p. 14). Vermont history is littered with failed redistricting and consolidation proposals, and centralization efforts have often seemed to take three steps forward and two steps back. For example, in 1827 the Vermont Legislature created the first Board of Commissioners of Common Schools and passed a law imposing reforms, but only five years later the legislature repealed most aspects of the unpopular law and abolished the State Board (Cross, 1992). After Horace Eaton, the first state superintendent, pushed hard for reforms, the legislature neutralized further efforts by simply not electing a superintendent from 1851 to 1856 (Richardson, 1994). One of his successors, State Superintendent Mason Stone described how, starting with Vermont’s second constitution, local school boards exercised local control with few limits for nearly all of the 19th Century:

The unit of school administration as established in 1782 was the district, and the administrative agent of the district was the committeeman. During the one hundred and ten years of his arbitrary rule his powers did not vary much, and they were sufficiently general and plenary as to make him practically a district
autocrat. Such he continued to be until the school district was absorbed into the larger unit of the township and his powers were assumed by the town board of school directors in 1893. (Stone, 1935, p. 56)

Since few voluntary district mergers took place prior to the reform (Stone, 1935), Stone advocated for the change from the district system to the town system, serving as both State Superintendent and also Lieutenant Governor for a period (Cross, 1992, p. 49). Until the passage of “The Vicious Act of ‘92”, as it was sometimes known, there were 2,214 school districts in Vermont, essentially one for each school. In its wake, there remained only 246 districts in the state; in other words, one for each town (Mclaughry, 2010).

“Vermont’s seeming confusion about how to supervise its schools, Cross found, stems, not from indecision or ignorance, but from the state’s tradition of independence and its desire to control its own destiny” (Cross, 1992, p. 107). This period’s ever-changing school governance structures at the state level reflected repeated attempts to establish a statewide supervision system, which were consistently overturned by proponents of local control. Cross’ chart reproduced here in Table 1 showed the frequent changes in state governance, which often followed attempts to impose statewide reforms.
Table 1

_Vermont Changes in State Supervision_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>State Supervision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1791 - 1827</td>
<td>No state control through board or executive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1827 - 1833</td>
<td>State board, no executive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1833 - 1845</td>
<td>No board, no executive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1845 - 1857</td>
<td>No board, executive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1857 - 1874</td>
<td>No board, executive, but no one appointed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1874 - 1915</td>
<td>No board, executive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915 - present</td>
<td>Board with executive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In recent decades, a state commissioner of education instead of a state superintendent fulfilled the executive role. However, in 2012, the state board-appointed position of commissioner was replaced by the governor-appointed position of Vermont Secretary of Education to oversee the Vermont Agency of Education. When asked if this new role would not place too much control in the hands of the governor, Secretary of Education Rebecca Holcombe explained, “This is not a prescriptive, top-down approach, but when it comes to student outcomes, we need to tell schools ‘This is where you need to be and this is how it will be measured’” (personal communication, July 23, 2015). Holcombe added that being a member of the governor’s cabinet allowed her to engage with the legislature in a way that was not possible before since it was clear that she represented the administration when providing direction to develop state education policy.
After the creation of supervisory unions in 1916, there were over 20 different Vermont school governance studies commissioned, all to little avail (Mathis, 1996; Richardson, 1994). Various governors, commissioners, and legislators sought to simplify Vermont school governance, but any perceived attempts to curtail local control met with public outcry, and reformers were forced to give up on any significant restructuring plans. In his review of five state governance commissions from this period, Richardson (1994) concluded that they often imported other states’ organizational approach instead of considering the “historical context or descriptive data about Vermont schools” (p. 166), and were crafted by an education, government, and business elite that “…did not represent the average Vermont citizen and in the end was rejected as foreign to the interest of Vermont’s children” (Richardson, 1994, p. 169). Richardson (1994) also noted that the proposals did not identify the potential educational benefits, and over-emphasized centralization as a one-size-fits-all approach doomed to fail in the Vermont context. “The public must be involved in the gathering of the data, its analysis, and the development of recommendations,” Richardson (1994) recommended, adding that variations of governance structures could be used on a regional basis to advance incremental reforms (pp. 170-71). Clearly, the history of education in Vermont reveals a state desirous of high-quality education for all, and covetous of keeping school governance local.

**Current Governance Reforms**

As it relates to local control of schools, the governance reforms in Vermont at the start of the 21st Century have reflected the bottom-up, pragmatic approach Richardson
recommended. In 2010, Act 153 provided significant financial incentives for voluntary district mergers by forming a Regional Educational District (RED). While very few REDs were ultimately approved, the new law led districts to consolidate services in an important way. Act 153 required districts, even if not forming a RED, to relinquish administration of special education, transportation, technology, and other services to the supervisory union. Even though Act 153 failed to create simpler governance structures statewide, the law paved the way for Act 46, a new law requiring districts to engage in merger studies in order to form unified prekindergarten–grade 12 supervisory districts. In this way, the state government avoided imposing top-down reform, and instead required local districts to forge new governance structures that made sense in their unique local contexts.

Act 46 designated Vermont’s patchwork governance system as an obstacle to providing high-quality, affordable educational opportunities, and found, “With 13 different types of school district governance structures, elementary and secondary education in Vermont lacks cohesive governance and delivery systems” (Act 46, p. X). The new law has established the preferred governance structure of a prekindergarten–grade 12 supervisory district with a minimum average daily membership of 900 students that is:

Organized and operates according to one of Vermont’s four most common governance structures, namely:

(A) a district that operates a school or schools for all resident students in prekindergarten or kindergarten through grade 12;
(B) a district that operates a school or schools for all resident students in prekindergarten or kindergarten through grade 8 and pays tuition for all resident students in grade 9 through grade 12;

(C) a district that operates a school or schools for all resident students in prekindergarten or kindergarten through grade 6 and pays tuition for all resident students in grade 7 through grade 12; or

(D) a district that operates no schools and pays tuition for all resident students in prekindergarten through grade 12. (Act 46, Sec. 5b)

Act 46 also provided for an alternative structure of supervisory union with member districts. The law established financial advantages for districts that adopt one of these governance structures and also a clear deadline. Starting in 2019, districts that have not found their own path to sustainable governance structures, through merger studies or other means, are subject to being restructured by the state.

The central proposition of Act 46 is that simplified governance structures will lead to cost and quality benefits for school districts. Executive Director of the Vermont Superintendents Association (VSA) Jeff Francis held that simplified governance structures would lead to school quality. According to Francis, “The opportunity in Act 46 is to get a broader array of offerings to kids through a network of schools and resources, rather than singular schools and resources” (personal communication, January, 11, 2017). Executive Director of the Vermont School Boards Association (VSBA) Nicole Mace has also argued for streamlining governance systems in order to improve efficiency and student outcomes. She said:
Vermont has one of the most complex education governance structures in the country, as well as the smallest school districts in the nation. We spend more than $1.5 billion through 330 administrative units serving 80,000 students. Over a third of our school districts oversee a single school with fewer than 100 students. Our cost per student is among the highest in the country, but our student outcomes are not always commensurate with the level of investment we commit to education. (Mace, 2016)

Perhaps more than any other governance reform, Act 46 has identified Vermont’s idiosyncratic governance structures as the main obstacle to achieving improved student outcomes and affordable school funding.

In less than two years since its passage, Act 46 has already started to reshape school districts. According to the Vermont School Boards Association, voters have approved reforms in 58 towns across 14 supervisory unions to date. Taken together, 66 districts either have merged or will merge into 12 unified union school districts and two modified unified union school districts. However, during the same period, voters across four supervisory unions voted down proposals that would have resulted in mergers across 22 districts (J. Gorman, personal communication, February 6, 2017). All told, successful Act 46 votes outnumber unsuccessful ones by a three to one ratio, and 10 more Act 46 votes are slated for 2017 (Danitz Pache, 2017, January 31). Many policymakers say that districts have moved quickly towards merger studies and votes, and that the success of Act 46 reforms has exceeded their expectations. According to Senate Education Committee Chair Philip Baruth, two-thirds of the state will have merged into larger
districts in the first two years of implementation. “It’s a miracle of public policy,” he said, adding, “The miracle hasn’t happened yet for many communities. They are still working on it,” (Danitz Pache, 2017, January 31, para. 20).

Act 46 has also begun to reshape the public discourse concerning local control of Vermont schools. Earlier governance reforms pitted “centralization” and “consolidation” against local control. This stands in contrast to “unification”, a more positive sounding term used for Act 46 change processes. In addition, the school governance discussion is about student opportunities and outcomes now, not solely about cost and efficiency. Finally, instead of simply putting out a redistricting proposal for public comment, this time the legislature has provided a framework to help districts to find their own solutions, taking into account their distinctive local contexts.

In summary, the Vermont case is defined by two forces that are sometimes at odds with each other – deeply held value of public education and a fiercely defended notion of local control. After 1892, when Vermont schools transitioned to the town system, school districts redefined their communities at the town level instead of the building level. In the wake of the passage of Act 46 in 2015, Vermon ters are once again redefining their school communities, this time to include neighboring towns as well. The current impetus for educational governance reform comes partly from the financial pressures faced by small districts, and partly from the hope that sustainable governance structures will help schools “offer substantial equity in the quality and variety of educational opportunities statewide” (Act 46, p. 3).
District Profiles

The descriptions that follow are of four districts that were studied as part of the overall case study. Taken together, they form a composite portrait of the Vermont case. Each of the following districts serves as an embedded unit in this case study and represents a range of attributes as defined by geography, demographics, and governance structured. Each district has unique local characteristics and is engaged in the difficult work of redefining its school community’s governance structures. Before examining their school board members’ perspectives and experiences of local control, it will be important to establish the distinct contexts in which these changes to local school governance are taking place.

Southern District

Southern District is geographically one of the largest in Vermont, spread over miles of rugged mountains, rolling hills, and picturesque valleys. Its 12 towns are located in four different counties and range in population from around 200 permanent residents to just over 4,000. The economic make-up of Southern District is also varied, with median family incomes ranging from just over $40,000 to approximately $60,000. The region has been marked by the decline of family-owned dairy farms, but also includes professionals who commute to cities as far away as New York City or telecommute even farther. With a number of ski destinations, historical landmarks, and stunning landscapes, the area attracts out-of-state tourists as well as seasonal residents who own secondary residences in the district.

Southern District’s largest town sits at the juncture of several of the surrounding valleys and serves as a cultural and population center in the region. The town’s
nationally and locally owned retail businesses attract name-brand shoppers, and the
bookstore regularly hosts book signings with famous authors. Southern District’s farms
produce award-winning cheeses, and local artists and artisans abound. One locally
owned company makes organic dog biscuits.

In addition to a dynamic service and retail sector, the local economy includes light
manufacturing, financial management companies, and design and technology firms. The
surrounding area also offers many choices of outdoor recreation, from hiking in the
Green Mountain Forest to fly-fishing in nearby streams. During the winter, many
Southern District schools have the tradition of releasing students from school early
midweek so they can benefit from reduced-price ski and snowboard lessons at a local ski
area.

Southern District has 1,755 students enrolled Pre-K through 12th Grade from
seven towns, but it does not operate a high school. The district operates six elementary
and elementary/middle schools and tuitions high school students to either independent
schools or out-of-district public schools, in some cases out-of-state. Approximately 92%
of Southern District students self-identify as white, 5% as black, and 3% as Asian. In
Southern District, 35% of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. On the Smarter
Balanced Assessment, 66% of Southern District 8th Graders tested in 2016 scored as
proficient or higher in English Language Arts and 47% in math.

On Town Meeting Day 2017, Southern District voters will decide whether or not
to become a single supervisory district as provided for under Act 46. The Southern
District merger study listed a number of potential educational benefits from the
governance reform, including but not limited to, a single monitoring policy to ensure equitable outcomes for all students, a single educational vision and mission, expanded curriculum offerings, flexibility in restructuring grades across elementary schools, a more consistent approach to prekindergarten, and improved alignment of k-8 curriculum and professional development. If it approves the merger, Southern District will receive Act 46 financial incentives and should see relatively little impact to its current property tax burden. The study has predicted that cost savings will likely be experienced on the long term due to consolidation of resources that has already taken place. Finally, under the law, no small school can be closed for four years following a merger without approval from the local district’s voters.

Table 2

Southern District Change in Governance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Boards</th>
<th>Board Members</th>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before Act 46 Reform (FY 2016)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2,290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proposed Act 46 Reform (FY 2018)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13*</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2,245</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* This includes four at-large seats from towns.

Mountain District

As the crow flies, the Mountain District extends over 30 miles down the western side of some of Vermont’s highest peaks. It takes about 45 minutes to drive from its northernmost to its southernmost point. Mountain District’s five towns’ populations
range from just over 1,000 residents to approximately 5,000. Mountain District’s median family incomes range from just over $52,000 to approximately $70,000.

People come to this part of Vermont to hike and bike in the surrounding mountains, but also for the area’s swimming holes, trout streams, and horse farms. Mountain District’s small towns include historic libraries, town meeting houses, white clapboard churches, and brick-fronted stores, but its local country stores struggle to stay in business. Some of the towns have quaint town greens, but not all of the towns have a well-established village center where shops and social activity can cluster together.

There are two family-friendly Alpine ski areas in Mountain District that provide jobs, and several Nordic ski centers with trails that stretch across the surrounding pastures and wooded hills. There is also a biathlon training center and a popular firing range. The oldest nature conservation center in the state is located in Mountain District. It provides educational camps and workshops for both children and adults. The center attracts bird watchers, snowshoers, and photographers from great distances.

There are several small farms in Mountain District, many using the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) model, whereby consumers buy shares in a farm, which entitles them to a certain amount of fresh, local produce provided directly by the farmer. There are also two alpaca farms in Mountain District that produce a range of wool products and offer visits by appointment.

In Mountain District, there are small independently owned businesses with contractors providing services in construction, excavation, landscaping and stonework, and consultants for legal, marketing, and renewable energy services. Given its scenic
locale, the wedding industry also contributes to economic activity, notably in lodging, floral, beauty, and catering services. In addition to locally run businesses, many townspeople reside in Mountain District and commute to bigger towns to work at a nearby hospital, university, or semiconductor development and manufacturing plant.

Mountain District has approximately 2,500 students enrolled Pre-K through 12th Grade from its five towns. The district operates nine schools including the union high school, which serves all towns. Approximately 94% of Mountain District students self-identify as white, 3% as multi-racial, 2% as Hispanic/Latino, less 1% as black, and less 1% as Asian. Fourteen percent (14%) of Mountain District students are eligible for free or reduced lunch and less than 1% of Mountain District students receive English Language Learning services. On the 2016 Smarter Balanced Assessment, 72% of Mountain District 8th Graders tested scored as proficient or higher in English Language Arts and 67% in math. Seventy-eight percent (78%) of Mountain District 11th Graders scored as proficient or higher in English Language Arts and 59% in Math.

In 2014, voters in all but one Mountain District’s towns voted to join through a modified union merger. The newly created modified union school district now functions as a single supervisory district but allows for the town that did not approve to maintain its local district with a five-person school board to operate its elementary school, until voting to join the union, it is hoped, at a later date. For the time being, this “non-member elementary district” will continue to vote on its elementary budget and pay related expenses separately from the modified union district. In addition to receiving financial incentives from the state, the merger study put forth several advantages to merging,
including but not limited to, flexibility in resource allocation across schools, operational cost efficiency, consistent deployment of technology resources, clarity of curriculum alignment, streamlined decision-making processes, and improved responsiveness from a single responsible supervising body.

Table 3

*Mountain District Change in Governance*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Boards</th>
<th>Board Members</th>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before Act 46 Reform (FY 2015)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2,647</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After Act 46 Reform (FY 2017)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21*</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2,516</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* One town has not joined the merger and kept a local board. On the union district board, towns have proportional representation based on population.

Central District

Central District is situated in the Champlain Valley basin between Lake Champlain and the Green Mountains. Its rolling countryside is sown with farms, orchards, and hardwoods. Despite the decline of family-owned farms in Vermont, this county continues to have a strong agricultural economy including a large proportion of acreage dedicated to agriculture, and a strong production of milk, fruit, and maple syrup. The region’s local industry includes paper products, furniture, beer, and cheese, which are derived from the local natural resources. Central District’s seven towns’ populations range from just under 600 residents to approximately 6,500 residents. Each town’s median family incomes range from approximately $44,000 per year to approximately $60,000.
The traditional county shire town is at the geographical center of the school district, at the confluence of an important highway and a creek that used to power the historic mills and marble quarry in the middle of the village. The town also boasts a liberal arts college, which is an important economic and cultural asset for the neighboring towns. In addition to providing concerts, exhibitions, and lectures series, the college attracts families who value educational attainment. This anchor for the county’s economy attracts magazine and book publishers, artists, advertising agencies, architects, illustrators, designers, writers, and other professionals. To sum up, Central District is found in a picturesque region that is a unique blend of agriculture, light industry, and what is increasingly known as the “knowledge economy”.

Central District has approximately 1,750 students enrolled Pre-K through 12th Grade from seven towns. Approximately 92% of Central District students self-identify as white, 5% as black, and 3% as Asian. Thirty-five percent (35%) of Central District students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. On the Smarter Balanced Assessment, 69% of Central District 8th Graders tested in 2016 scored as proficient or higher in English Language Arts and 57% in math. Sixty-five percent (65%) of Central District 11th Graders scored as proficient or higher in English Language Arts and 51% in Math.

Until its successful Act 46 unification vote in 2016, Central District was a supervisory union comprised of nine local districts, one for each of the seven towns, a unified district for Grades 7-12, and a supervisory union district with members representing each of the eight other districts. Now Central District is a prekindergarten-12 unified district with a single board based on proportional representation according to
town population. The new 13-member unified board is composed of seven members from the shire town, and one member from each of the remaining smaller towns. It is important to note that the new board members are elected at-large from across the seven towns. A Central District community information document described the importance of this change in governance in this way, “At-large voting enables all voters to have a say in who is elected in each town and means that board members will answer to all towns, not just the town in which they reside”. It also pointed to the following anticipated merger benefits, “a single governing body to better serve all citizens and promote excellent educational leadership”, “more transparent and efficient school finances”, “equitable opportunities for students regardless of which school they attend, financial incentives”, and “local communities determine the structure of their school districts”.

Table 4

*Central District Change in Governance*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Boards</th>
<th>Board Members</th>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before Act 46 Reform (FY 2015)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1,755</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After Act 46 Reform (FY 2017)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13*</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1,735</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Towns have proportional representation based on population with at-large voting across towns.

**City District**

City District serves one of Vermont’s largest cities, but one that is still small by national standards—no city in Vermont has a population of more than 50,000 residents. City District residents enjoy a vibrant downtown with nearby mountain and lake views.
The city’s clean air and outdoors lifestyle often contributes to a high quality of life, and also boasts a lively arts scene, festivals, and sporting events throughout the year. Progressive thinking largely shapes the city’s political culture, and the local government has made renewable energy a priority. The city has one of the more diverse populations in the state, due in part to a refugee resettlement program. While some City District students live in raised ranches or historic Victorians that are single-family homes, others live in large subsidized housing units where neighborhoods’ drug disputes, domestic violence, and a heavy police presence are a part of daily life.

Many City residents work for nearby colleges or hospitals, but a significant number of local jobs also come from manufacturing, medical software, online marketing, and defense sectors. The city also includes several corporate headquarters, sometimes from enterprises that started locally and have since grown into national or multinational companies. Tourists and college students also fuel a retail sector that contributes to the local economy.

City District has nearly 4,000 students enrolled Pre-K through 12th Grade. Approximately 65% of City District students self-identify as white, 14% as black, 12% as Asian, and 4% as Hispanic /Latino. Approximately 16% receive English Language Learning services. Approximately 62% of City District students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. On the Smarter Balanced Assessment, 60% of City District 8th Graders tested in 2016 scored as proficient or higher in English Language Arts and 45% in math. Fifty percent (50%) of City District 11th Graders scored as proficient or higher in English Language Arts and 37% in Math.
As a unified Pre-K through 12th Grade district, the City District already reflected the state’s preferred governance structure, and as one of the larger districts in the state, no merger discussions or studies are under consideration. In 2015, City District changed its school board structure to align with changes in the organization of the city’s voting districts and wards. In this way, the school board has a parallel structure to the city council. Perhaps the main challenge faced by Central District has been negotiating clear roles and boundaries between the mayor, school board, superintendent, and district administrators. In 2014, longstanding controversies concerning the district’s diversity plan and financial management led to the resignations of the superintendent and finance director. In the preceding months, the mayor publicly called for the superintendent to step down and offered to have the city finance officer review the district’s finances. Prior to 2014, the district and city conducted a joint audit, and the district’s first independent audit at that time was to clarify the source of recurring structural budget deficits. After the superintendent resigned, the mayor offered to participate in the search for a new superintendent and continued to make public comments and recommendations regarding the district’s administration. The mayor’s repeated interventions led to Secretary Holcombe issuing a public reminder that these activities are the sole purview of the City District school board and the Vermont Agency of Education. It is worth noting that the school board web page currently lists seven standing committees alongside its elected members and officers. This new approach may reflect a belief on the part of board members that they need to more closely monitor, or even participate in, the district’s operations and management.
Table 5

City District Change in Governance

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<td>11</td>
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* Formerly two members from each of seven wards, now one from each of eight wards and one from each of four districts.

Chapter Summary

To understand how local control functions as a social construct in Vermont, it is essential to take into account Vermonters’ long-defended tradition of local school governance and the state’s enduring commitment to public education. It is also important to take into account the current governance reforms that have begun to redefine local control of Vermont public schools in the 21st Century. These forces have contributed to reshaping Vermonters’ understanding of what local control means, and how it may evolve in the years to come. The four districts profiled here represent the embedded units of this case study of Vermont school governance. Each has unique attributes as defined by demographics, geography, and governance structures. Each district is in a period of significant transition as well. As the districts navigate these changes, it is clear that the dominant Vermonters value high-quality equitable education, and that the question of local control of schools often animates policy discussions and deliberations. The chapter that follows will examine how these deeply held values coexist by analyzing Vermont
school board members’ perceptions and experiences of local control in their pivotal role in public school.
CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

When examined as an extreme case, Vermont school governance can shed light on local control as a social construct. The purpose of this chapter is to analyze school board members’ perspectives and experiences of local control of schools through data collected in over 30 hours of interviews conducted around the state. This analysis of the Vermont case examined themes that emerged across the study’s four sites; namely, the districts described in Chapter 4, which are the subunits of this case study. Three central questions emerged through analysis of the data:

• How do school board members define local control of schools?
• In practice, what factors currently limit the exercise of local control?
• What changes in local school governance do board members foresee in the coming years?

Struggling to Define Local Control

While local control of schools is an idea that is widely embraced by Vermonters, defining exactly what is meant by the concept is problematic. Board members interviewed described a proud tradition of local governance and participatory democracy that has a long history in the state and remains an important cultural value. However, multiple meanings for local control appeared to coexist, and there appeared to be a lack of clarity relating to board roles and local governance structures. Furthermore, many board members found there to be a dark side to local governance that is rarely evoked when compared to the generally favorable sentiment associated with the expression “local control”. The section that follows will shed new light on the question of how
school board members perceive local control based on their experiences in their various local contexts.

**A Proud Tradition**

When asked if Vermonters had a unique perception of local control, many school board members cited the traditional New England Town Meeting, town select boards, and school boards as institutions that exemplify local governance. When shown a Norman Rockwell portrayal of a Vermont town meeting as an interview prompt, board members described local governance traditions favorably and spoke proudly of “grass roots”, “direct democracy”, “pure democracy”, “self-governance”, “hands-on”, “community involvement”, and “standing up for your beliefs”. They described local school governance as something that endures in Vermont in a special way. The City District School Board Chair said,

I think that there is simultaneously a pride in local control. Town meeting day doesn’t happen many places in the country, and certainly it happens Vermont, New Hampshire, parts of Massachusetts I guess, parts of Maine. It’s really gone anywhere else in the country.

A City District board member agreed, specifying that “even in New Hampshire, which is very similar, people don’t seem to have any expectation that they have self-determination about their community the way Vermonter do.” A Southern District board member said, “I think Vermont has a unique understanding and we guard and hold onto all of the control we can.” For another Southern District board member, Vermont’s local governance traditions are “where people can get together and make their differences
known and try and come up with something that makes sense.” Without exception, Vermont school board members and policymakers pointed to local control as a proud Vermont tradition worth maintaining.

Some board members saw pride in local control as a reflection of Vermont’s independent spirit. A Southern District board member found Vermont political culture to be unique, possibly following the beat of a different drummer when compared to other states:

I think there’s a perception that Vermonter are different, and certainly recently with Bernie and all the other things, Howard Dean before him, and all the stuff that we do as a state. We all feel like we are different and we are proud of that.

The City District Superintendent described Vermont governance culture as, “That strain of independence that runs through the state. Progressive independence. People truly stand up for what they believe in, even if they’re standing up to their government.” Many board members connected Vermonter’s independent spirit to the state’s geography. After all, many still see Vermont as the “brave little state” that had to fight in order to avoid being swallowed up by its bigger neighbors. The geographical isolation of Vermont’s towns may have contributed to this independent streak too. As a multi-generational Vermonter, the Mountain District Superintendent observed:

We have so many tiny towns that are spread out, that are rural, were agricultural for generations, and so there was not a lot of support coming from Montpelier to help them financially, for infrastructure, for schools. They had to locally make decisions on how they were going to fund the things that were most important to
them. [Vermonters] care about others, want to help kids, are committed to their community, want to do the right thing, but they’re very wary of the government. I think that goes back generations to, “They were never very helpful before, and we had to do it on our own, and we’ve come this far doing it on our own. Don’t tell us what to do.”

It stands to reason, therefore, that Vermont’s small, relatively isolated, autonomous-minded communities shaped Vermonters’ conception of local control. It would seem that this fiercely independent, grassroots ethos could only reinforce the notion that small is beautiful, and that the more local government is, the better it must be.

Given Vermonters’ predilection for government that is close to the people, school boards loom large in the public’s understanding of what local control means. “I think moving the decision-making further away from the point that’s closest to the student is a disadvantage,” said a City District board member. When asked what first comes to mind when she thinks of local control, Vermont Secretary of Education Rebecca Holcombe said:

The first thing I think of is school boards. These are the people who put in long hours for a sometimes thankless job, because no matter what you do, somebody is going to be unhappy with your decision. I think Vermonters value local control because they care about having high-quality schools and want to be involved in their local schools.

Board members, superintendents, and policymakers repeatedly echoed Secretary Holcombe’s view that Vermonters place a high value on both education and local
governance. Time and again, board members expressed pride as elected representatives who operate “closest to the ground”, as well as a responsibility to support their local school community through their work.

**Participatory Democracy**

Many board members found the number of school board members in the state reflected a high degree of participation in local governance, while others questioned the extent to which boards reflected the communities they represented. For a Southern District board member, “The plus side is that we have this many school board members in the state of Vermont. It shows that Vermont really [cares] about education, and they do. There is no doubt.” The Southern District Chair agreed, saying:

I like us having a lot of school board members. To me part of it is between school board members and prior school board member we’ve got more people in this state that are actually knowledgeable and interested in education.

However, some board members found there was sometimes a misguided assumption that local control of schools equated with “representative voices”. The City District Board Chair emphasized the importance of getting “the cross-section of voices who really are representative of the community” and described his board’s outreach to community organizations to bring diverse perspectives to the board, including New Americans. “A lot of voices get left out, so, at public forum, we hear from a lot of the same people, a lot of the same messages,” described another City District board member. A Central District board member shared her concern, saying, “I think that one of the problems with local control is who is actually controlling it, and is it really representative of the community?”
The Central District Superintendent agreed, adding, “We tend to see the same kinds of people at the table.” While many board members found that the large numbers of Vermonters serving on local boards reflected an enduring tradition of participatory democracy, others questioned to what extent school board membership reflected their local communities.

When considering whether boards reflect a cross-section of their communities, the difficulty of filling vacant seats appeared to be a compounding factor. With 87% of elected board positions uncontested by a recent estimate (Mace, personal communication, January 17, 2017), there is a concern that social connections influence board successions. A Central District board member said she made an effort to “broaden” her outreach because “people tend to recruit people who look like them”. A Mountain District board member recounted:

A Halloween party I went to a few years ago where four of the five school board members happened to be there, and it was ... That sort of thing just happens all the time, and so I think that our perception may be tied to access, but it really to me seems to be a familiarity.

While there may be nothing wrong with encouraging friends and neighbors to run for the local board, the fear is that board composition may not be as socio-economically diverse as board members would like. “I don’t believe that the people that we profess to be doing this all for, including those on social supports, the free and reduced lunch people, are adequately represented at the table,” observed a Mountain District board member. With many board members reporting that they often felt they needed to recruit new members in

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order to fill vacancies, the difficulty of getting a representative cross-section of the community remained. “The problem is that there’s not enough people to get to fill these positions,” said a Southern District board member. “It’s so hard to get people to fill the spots we already have, let alone to show up for the meetings,” added another Southern District board member. It is possible that the relatively large number of school board positions in the small state of Vermont may be contributing to the high number of unopposed board races, and the ongoing challenge of socio-economic diversity on school boards.

VSBA Executive Director Nicole Mace said the organization does not collect demographic data, but found that school boards largely reflected statewide racial demographics, adding that 98% of Vermonters self-identify as white. With two African-Americans serving on the City Board concurrently for the first time, a City Board member expressed hope that boards would become increasingly diverse. Using information from a VSBA member listing, Emerge Vermont, a non-profit that trains female democratic candidates for public office, found that school boards are the only elected body in Vermont where women have achieved parity: 51% of school board members in the state are women, as compared to 41% of legislators, and only 21% of select board members (R. Hardy, January 29, 2017, personal communication). Still some board members worried that social advantage played a role in who serves on boards. For a City District board member things would not change, “Unless we intervene to do things proactively to change who feels the power to be on these boards, the pathway for people: women, minorities, etc. to be on these boards.” While board members recognized the
challenge of mustering a diversity of board candidates, it is important to note that Vermont school boards compared favorably to other elected positions on this question. School boards appeared to be more representative of their local communities than other elected offices.

Aside from the question of representation, board members spoke proudly of the power of direct participation by constituents. “Boards are required to have community input at every open meeting, and this is part of what we have,” said one City District board member. “We, at the school board, have recently had a lot of people feel very free to speak out because a lot of the community is upset,” added another City District board member. A Mountain District board member said that, while large community turnout was rare, it was important to hear public comments as “a time for community members to share what they think” so boards can “see what’s on people’s minds”. As perhaps the most accessible of elected officials, board members proudly described how their open meetings and budget process allowed community members to engage directly in the democratic process of their work. Across districts and throughout the state, board members and policymakers unanimously agreed that Vermonters’ practice of local governance, including school governance, is unique and also a great source of pride.

**Multiple Meanings**

While many board members expressed pride in Vermont’s ethos of independent-minded self-governance, they found that local control is ill defined. Many board members said they observed that the expression “local control” meant different things to different people, and several referred to the idea as a “myth”. For example, a Mountain
District board member said, “I just think that it’s a very broad catch-all thing that sounds really nice in an idyllic world,” adding, “It is practiced and understood so differently throughout the state.” Another Mountain District board member found that “local control is a phrase thrown around a lot” and yet another said that it “varies region to region. It really is a cultural phenomenon.” A Central District board member said, “I think it’s a misunderstood expression. It’s something that people grab onto without fully understanding what it means.” Another Central District board member recounted, “...you hear Vermonters talk about local control and they have no idea what that means. It just means that they care about it.” The Central District Chair found that community members’ definitions of local control “really run the gamut” and that Vermonters have a “confused understanding of local control”. A Mountain District board member put it this way:

Local control, aside from being a myth, is really culturally specific and has morphed into something that’s so big in a sense that it’s meaningless, but is also practiced so differently and interpreted so differently that you really have to focus on what’s meaningful about schools that communities want to impact. I think that that’s really the part that we have to focus on. What is really meaningful about parents and communities in terms of their interaction with the school?

Board members found that multiple meanings of local control coexisted, and that interpretations varied widely. There was a broad consensus among school board members that the idea of local control in Vermont is much loved, but poorly understood.
Of course, a contributing factor to this confusion is likely Vermont’s myriad governance structures. After all, a three-member local district school board member overseeing a single, small school experiences governance very differently than a board member serving on the supervisory union board of a large district. “Sadly, I don’t think you can overestimate how little people know about school governance for the most part. I would say the vast majority of people don’t know the difference between a supervisory union and a district,” a Southern District board member explained. VSBA Executive Director Nicole Mace explained, “In terms of transparency and accountability for public dollars, in the supervisory union structure, that’s hard for average citizens to understand,” adding, “You often have districts with voters looking at multiple budgets or voting on multiple budgets, an elementary budget and a high school budget, sometimes a middle high school budget. They don’t really know what they’re voting on.” Variation in governance structures appeared to contribute to high variability in Vermonters’ definitions of local control of schools.

In addition to the complexity of Vermont’s small and diverse governance structures, there is not a broadly shared understanding of the role of school board members across the state. “I would say that most of the districts, the boards, had no idea of what their job actually was supposed to be,” asserted the Southern District Chair. “The hardest work for board members to do, I believe, is understanding that there’s a separation between who they are as a community member, a parent, let alone an educator,” said a Mountain District board member. Taken together, board members’ comments indicated concern with the degree of confusion surrounding how their local
governance structures function and the role board members are meant to play in these structures.

An ongoing source of tension and confusion in defining board roles is the difference between governance and management. Since it fell to local boards to build, operate, and maintain their local schools for much of Vermont’s history, boards were accustomed to running their small schools. This historical tradition of maintaining one-room schoolhouses and neighborhood schools harks back to New England’s earliest common schools. Stone (1935) portrayed the ruggedly independent and do-it-yourself nature of rural Vermont schools in this way:

The subjects taught were few, and the books were fewer. Fortunate and envied was the pupil who possessed a book of any kind…There was no school law, no school board, no supervision, no certificating-system, simply a teacher. He probably knew little about books; but he knew much about children. He did not teach for wages; he taught to accommodate. He was not versed in pedagogy; but he knew how to get results. He did not sense the fine distinctions in methods; but he felt his responsibility. (p.20)

Vermont’s low population density and steep valleys allowed these traditions to continue into the 20th Century, even as governance structures became more formal and the state government played an ever-increasing role in how schools are operated and funded. The Mountain District Chair described it this way:

You also think of the geographical component of Vermont when you used to have your local schools because you were really separated by hills, valley, streams… A
lot of our towns still are that way, but transportation and other means have reduced that geographic connection so to speak. You had to be responsible for everything in your school.

Even as improved technology, transportation, and communications have reduced the isolation of Vermont’s small towns, the longstanding tradition of locally operated schools appeared to shape Vermonters’ understanding of local control. For many, the difference between governance and operations remained unclear and still contributed to confusion as to what local control of schools actually means.

For some local school boards, “hands-on” was more than a figure of speech. “We do get to step in a little bit when the toilets break down or the building’s flooded. Then the school board gets there,” said a Central District board member to describe her local board’s oversight of its small school. A Mountain District board member said that her local board does not get involved with “playground, food services, etc.” but that some do, and tend to micromanage in many situations. Another Mountain District board member described his local board’s tendency to get involved in their small school’s operations:

If the dishwasher needed to be repaired, you would have heard about it from your kid. That would be talked about at a school board meeting. I think part of the downside to all of that knowledge is that it is so easy to get involved in the minutia. It’s not really the business of school board. Yes, it’s important that the dishwasher be operational, but that’s not something that a school board should really be concerned with because what does that have to do with education?
A Central District board member said, “There is a perception that the school board runs everything. Like, we hire the teachers, we decide what color to paint the gym, and all of these things.” The Southern District Chair concurred, admitting, “I was guilty of this too. Boards tend to fill in by getting into micromanagement issues, and different things.” He added, “If we tried to run everything ourselves we could not do it very well. We’d be spending all our time doing administrative things instead of education.” A Mountain District board member connected many boards’ hands-on approach back to Vermont history, adding, “Quite literally boards built, maintained school buildings, hired, fed, and housed school teachers, supported the day to day operation of schools.” Clearly, this long tradition continued to influence how some board members conceived of local control. In some of Vermont’s small towns, local control of schools still meant school operations and maintenance, as opposed to governance.

While school board involvement in daily operations was clearly well intentioned, unfortunately, it often led to confusion and tensions with school administrators. “The role of the school board is not to be the principal. It’s not to oversee the daily operations. The role for the school board is to help make the over-arching policy,” explained one Southern District board member. Some board members described hiring principals or working closely with principals, which is a duty of superintendents. Another Southern District board member said he found principals “felt they were answering to their own local boards. That’s a real issue. Because the principals need to answer to the superintendent,” he asserted. The Southern District Superintendent described past board members who were concerned he would be “telling their principal what to do”. He
replied that he intended to do just that because it was his job to do so. The Central District Board Chair noted wide-ranging norms between boards and administrators, even across neighboring local districts within the same supervisory union, saying, “It varies principal to principal what the board does, even without that managerial responsibility in the schools, which is not necessarily a positive thing,” and, “The individual district boards operate differently one from another in varying degrees of management versus governance.” He concluded:

    My takeaway was that most people don’t, first of all, have an understanding of what the role of the school board is or has become for some people. Local control is defined in so many different ways. From hiring the teachers, to managing the building, to setting curriculum, it’s misunderstandings, none of which falls to the board itself.

Other board members described the “slippery slope for boards” of sliding into discussions about the boiler, the school play, or school lunches. Board members repeatedly described how local control was often misconstrued as operating or managing local schools, instead of fulfilling a governance role focused on districtwide educational outcomes.

    Nevertheless, many board members interviewed appeared to have a clear understanding of the difference between administrator and board roles, and insisted on the important difference between management and governance. “I don’t think it’s a place for boards to be in there micro-managing that budget too, too much,” said a Central District board member, adding, “I realized that my role was more as a policymaker so I
found myself stepping away from day-to-day operations, micro-managing, and really trying to support leadership.” A Southern District board member agreed:

The responsibility of the board is to make policy. To make policy and allow the administration to enforce the policy, and then the board then holds the superintendent responsible to ensure that policies are carried out. That is the responsibility of the board. The responsibility of the board is not to get involved with day-to-day management of the school.

Another Southern District board member found that board micromanagement stemmed from confusion about board roles:

I mean, the board is tricky because I don’t think most people know really what the school board’s job is. They think you’re involved a lot more than you should be. There are boards that are involved. Our board has changed over the years so that some board members try to be involved in ways that really is not their purview.

The Mountain District Chair clarified that local control was not synonymous with management and pointed to the historical roots of local control as part of the confusion:

It’s not to control [administrators] and what they do and not to control what goes on inside the walls, whatsoever. Again, I think it’s this treasured value that many Vermonters have through history of wanting to oversee the schools and having that, and rightfully so, it worked for a long time.

VSA Executive Director Jeff Francis concurred:

What we have in Vermont right now in some places, is we’ve got micro-involvement of boards over systems that really don’t offer their children very
much by way of their own opportunity and exposure. Really, that ought to be reversed. You want kids to have exposure and opportunity with everything the school system provides, and you want the governing body to be making high-level decisions about focus, direction, at some level resource allocation, but you don’t want them having exposure to every single element of the school system.

While confusion regarding the respective roles of school boards and administrators persisted, there appeared to be a growing consensus among board members that there is an important difference between governance and management. The common misperception that local control means actually running a local school appeared to be on the wane.

Finally, when responding to a photo of a father, mother, and child happily reading together as an interview prompt, some board members found that local control was sometimes confused with parental control. “A lot of people think that parental control is local control,” shared a Central District board member, and a Mountain District board member found that parental control is the “best avenue for local control”. A Southern District board member said a top priority was “parental involvement, getting a chance for people to feel like they’re being listened to” and a Central District board member emphasized the importance of “giving parents that voice – being able to hear from them what they feel is going right, what is going wrong, and their concerns. I guess that’s the one way we can have that voice, that control.” However, a Southern District asserted, “I think they are different. Parental control is about individual children and choices their parents make for them. There might be more choices available if there was less local
control.” A Mountain District board member found that parents sometimes sought to end-run school supervision and management by bringing concerns directly to the school board:

I think our role as board members is to ultimately, the first rule is, "I’m sorry you have a problem with the bus driver. Have you talked to the bus driver? Talk to the person." You have a problem with your classroom teacher. Have you talked to your classroom teacher? Yeah, you have. Have you talked to their boss? … A lot of people want to see instantaneous change or results and depending whether you’re at a traffic light talking through a window or you’re on a grocery aisle and it depends how far into that discussion you get.

When considering the informal nature of parent communications with local boards, often taking place in social settings, it appeared that some boards struggled to distinguish between community engagement, public comment in open meetings, and conversations with friends and neighbors. While all board members interviewed cited responsiveness to constituents as an important part of their work, some identified a difference between local control and parental control, while, for others, the respective roles were blurred.

The Dark Side

Aside from confusion around board roles, many board members recognized that local control had a dark side sometimes. “Nationally there’s an ugly history of local control. Local control led to Jim Crow laws in the South,” the City District Chair pointed out. Mountain District board members pointed to the rough-and-tumble nature of some public meetings, where the loudest voices are sometimes intimidating and “might not be
best for students”. They gave as examples when local taxpayers wanted to cut funds for special education and eliminate the full-time position of principal at a small school. Other board members used the words “parochialism”, “nostalgia”, “emotions”, “unsustainable”, “expensive”, and “backward-looking” to describe local control at its worst.

Some board members said that when local control was too parochial, it could lead to members advancing pet agendas or exerting undue influence. The City District Chair explained:

For instance, you can have situations where a very local fight, within a particular neighborhood, is being couched in terms of this is what’s good for the district, when really it’s about whose dog went to the bathroom in my yard, and they have a personal grudge, either a board member or a community member. These sorts of politics can, I think, work their way into the functioning of the board and of the district.

A Central District board member described “this concept that one gets to do it their way instead of talking about what the broader community and state and region might want to do. It sort of blocks off any kind of deliberation or debate or conversation.” A Mountain District board member said local control could be “a stand-in for getting my way and controlling the school, not the district, but controlling the school, the contents and the staff within.” Similarly, the Southern District Superintendent found that, “People love local control when they think they can influence the process, but then when they come confronted with a board that’s fully equipped to make a decision and decides not in their
favor, then they hate it.” He also described an instance where a recently fired administrative assistant joined the school board motivated by a desire for revenge—once on the board, she hoped to fire the principal, her former supervisor. A board member in the same district expressed relief that they do not have any “agenda people” on the board anymore. Several board members described unhelpful interactions when board members brought personal agendas or parochial concerns to their local board’s work.

Other board members said that, as a cultural force, local control tended to be backwards looking in some cases. The Southern District Chair said he often heard, “It was good enough when I was a kid. There’s nothing wrong with this system,” and a Mountain District board member said that for some, local control “means I don’t want anything to change…means we’ve done it this way for a million years…or I’m on the school board, my father and grandfather were also on the school board and this is my identity in town.” VSA Executive Director Jeff Francis found that the traditional understanding of local control is closely associated with the small town itself, saying, “The adult definition of community oftentimes centered around historically traditional buildings, like a church and a town hall and a school, create an imagery for people that is looking backward.” For some board members, an over-emphasis on local control led to a reluctance to change, and recalcitrance in the face of the reforms needed for Vermont school districts in the 21st Century.

Board members also suggested that the widespread attachment to local control prevents us from seeing where it has worked and where it hasn’t. They warned against
the danger of equating local control with good governance. The City District Chair put it this way:

Local control by itself means local control. It doesn’t mean something good to me. It doesn’t mean something bad to me. It means that certain voices closer to the location are going to be the ones who are going to be governing without any assumption that they’re going to be doing better or worse than someone from afar.

The Central District Superintendent, who has worked in other states, found that by paying too much attention to process, Vermonters have sometimes failed to sufficiently examine educational systems and outcomes, saying:

One of the complications that I see with a focus on local control is it becomes an end in itself as opposed to a means by which to improve the experience for students. This is about the identity and integrity of the adults, not about what makes the most sense for the institutions to run efficiently, to be able to move and change in the ways that we need to in 2016 in education…As a state, because of local control, we haven’t done probably some of the work that other states have done to find common ground. Our common ground has just been our process, democracy, not an actual end, which is an assessment system, for example.

A Central District board member similarly found that the dynamics of small local boards sometimes diverted attention from the core educational mission:

We have schools in our district that have 35 kids and five school board members, so that’s one for every seven kids. I think it’s crazy. It becomes a system about adults instead of a system about kids. What we saw a lot in our conversations
about our merger was all of these adult feelings about control and power and community and access, and it was really hard to say, ‘Look, those are adult issues. What about the kids?’ It’s like, too many adults in the equation, not enough kids, I think.

Even if they clearly valued local governance traditions, board members and policymakers were clear-eyed about the dark side of local control. They not only shared examples of abuses committed under the banner of local control, but also how, as a paradigm, local control could become an end in itself, instead of the means to high-quality educational outcomes.

Finally, some board members expressed concern that confusion regarding governance roles and structures may have contributed to a school leadership crisis. In a presentation to Vermont school board members, Secretary Holcombe demonstrated that between 2010 and 2014, over half of Vermont school districts had more than one superintendent, and one in four districts had three or more superintendents during the same period (2014). At the start of the 2016 school year, close to one in four principals was starting in a new position (K. Page, May 31, 2016, personal communication). This has led some observers to say Vermont is experiencing a school leadership crisis. Board members observed that when districts are small, some board members misconstrue their role as operational instead of one of governance. “If you can’t fix the cultural mentality of what a board member is supposed to do, if you can’t attract and retain top-performing people, you’ll just amplify the bad stuff,” explained a Mountain District board member.

The Southern District Superintendent cited data showing that board interference is the
leading cause of principal turnover in state. The City District Superintendent pointed to a total of eight administrators in the district, including herself, who resigned from various positions due to poor relations with school board members in a single year.

A Central District board member described losing the superintendent and having the district’s central office “implode” when five out of its six administrators left within two years. “That’s not us. That’s the administrators,” is how he described some board members’ reaction to the turnover, adding, “From my perspective, I saw it as the whole system. The governing system. Some of the challenges when you have a board with that many board members.” For the Southern District Superintendent, “These systems chew people up because they’re not really systems” adding, “In fairness, I don’t think we have a monopoly on poor leadership. I just think that we have systems that are incredibly poor or difficult to manage.”

Mace found that one of the challenges of “hyper-local governance structures” is that administrators spend time supporting board members instead of students. She said she had countless examples of capable administrators leaving positions because governance structures were in “disarray”. A Southern District board member observed that, “Administrators and our superintendents are spending a lot of time on governance issues, and they’re not spending time on what they are professionally trained to do.”

Along the same lines, a Mountain District board member said,

I get very upset when I see boards talking about how they run their meeting as a grilling of the principal. That’s five people. That’s not the community. That’s a really privileged spot to be into that often has nothing to do with improving
education. Everyday, every time you’re having a meeting, what are we doing to improve education?

Complex local governance structures and confusion about board roles appeared to be taking a toll on Vermont superintendents and principals as reflected by statewide statistics on administrator turnover and experiences reported by board members in this study.

In conclusion, board members’ perspectives and experiences revealed that the social construct of local control was difficult to define. While local control figures prominently in the state’s political and education policy discourse, Vermonters appeared to associate multiple meanings with the concept. Even though board members expressed pride in Vermont’s grassroots, independent political culture, they also expressed concern at how little understood local control is in the context of local school governance. Board members observed that many struggled to find the difference between governance and management, and this sometimes led to tensions between school boards and administrators. Board members also recognized that local control has a less often examined dark side as well. Taken together, board members’ perspectives and experiences appeared to show that local control meant different things to different people, and that the ill-defined nature of this powerful social construct sometimes led to confusion and conflict in the local governance context.

**Limits on Local Control**

Besides the problem between the local control ideal and its day-to-day reality, board members described many limits on local control as they experienced it. Board
members said that with limited local resources, their budgets were often largely
determined by operational costs or unexpected cost events. They also found that their
autonomy was circumscribed in many areas by state and federal mandates, or decisions
and policies now required at the supervisory union level regarding curriculum,
technology, transportation, and other important services.

**Limited Local Resources**

While the idea of self-operated, self-governed schools appeared to resonate with
Vermonters’ attachment to local government, Board members interviewed explained that
limited local resources effectively curtailed their ability to exercise local decision-
making. Board members described how, in small districts especially, limited resources
were a significant constraint on local control. A Southern District board member put it
this way:

> I think there’s the misperception that we really have much latitude in our
> education spending. So much of it is prescribed by law, prescribed by logistics
> and population and special ed that I don’t think there is nearly the amount of
> control over budget that people think there is.

The Mountain District Board Chair explained, “Our local school boards had visions and
goals and all that, but to achieve those, you’re really limited again by the resources
available to you.” In response to where she felt she exercised the least amount of local
control in her work, a Central District board member said, “The budgets, I guess, would
be probably the least control.” A Southern District board member said, “I don’t look at
local control necessarily as a good thing. I think local control means you’re going to
make local choices, but you’re also going to have local resources that are very, very
limited in most cases.” After her small district had to cut the transportation budget, a
Central District board member described how the school scrambled to find enough
parents to drive students on field trips. Clearly frustrated, she concluded, “They have
their local control, but at what cost? It’s total narrowness.” Many board members
expressed similar frustration at how their local district’s budget imposed limits on their
ability to exercise local control.

The VSBA’s Nicole Mace agreed that the lack of available resources limited
options for boards of small local districts, saying, “The reality is we’re losing population,
there’s a lot of pressure to be more affordable. You can’t get there with these micro-
districts. You just can’t.” Secretary Holcombe concurred, observing,

The thing about local control is that with declining student enrollment, school
boards have fewer resources to work with, and so the majority of their control is
simply choosing which programs to cut. They’re faced with significant financial
challenges that ultimately reduce their control over how they run their schools to
decisions around what to cut. Unfortunately, this is the reality that many school
boards are up against.

A Southern District board member came to the same conclusion, asserting, “If you think
you’re going to control the budget and actually cut spending without cutting something
really important in the budget that won’t hurt kids, those days are long gone. There is no
fat left. There’s only muscle.” When examining the difference between the cherished
ideal of local control and the day-to-day reality of board members, limited local resources
appeared to restrict significantly their ability to make choices on behalf of their districts.

In fact, many board members found that their local budgets were largely prescribed by operational costs, leaving them little discretionary maneuvering room to shape their local budget. A Southern District board member described the disconnect between the widespread belief in local control and the harsh reality of local budgets in this way:

We have a lot of responsibility and very little authority. People are telling us that we shouldn’t take that attitude, that we should exercise our full democratic right as much as we can. So, we’re trying to do that, but when you’ve got three-year contracts and 80% of your budget is labor…and then on top of that you’ve got unfunded mandates, and you’ve got special ed requirements, and you’ve got other things that are steering a whole lot of your money.

Another Southern District board member said, “Most of the budget is out of our control because costs such as health insurance rise and we do not have the ability to control them,” and a Mountain District board member said, “So many other figures are already set in stone from other factors, for example, contracts, insurance, student enrollment.” A Central District board member found that “between teacher contracts…heating oil, electricity…you just can’t do a lot,” and another Central District board member agreed, saying, “The cost of employment is the biggest chunk of everything we spend in education. It’s pretty much a higher percentage in the small schools than it is in the larger.” Board members repeatedly described the extent to which operational costs
dictated their local districts’ budgets and limited their scope of action from the standpoint of local control.

Moreover, board members related that their smaller local districts were less able to absorb unexpected financial costs when they arose. A Mountain District board member stated, “If the boiler breaks in a small school, you’re screwed two years down the road because of the way the budget cycle works,” adding, “we probably tolerated a leaky roof and some other suboptimal facilities issues for longer than we would have liked.” While acknowledging the importance of local control, a Southern District board member warned against the real-life limits of very small districts:

If three kids come in that you didn’t expect and there’s a huge expense, you’re pretty much cutting the music program, the technology program, maybe some sports, maybe cutting a teacher. When you really want to get serious about this and the adults that are playing these games, we’re talking about an entire generation of kids. We’re taking care of kids here.

Another Southern District board member noted, “Stability is key. Financial stability, not getting rocked when you’ve got kids are coming into your very tiny district that you can’t afford, or the building starts falling apart. How are you going to pay for that?” The Mountain District Superintendent elaborated on the difficulty small local districts face given the number of budgetary factors that fall beyond board members’ control:

How can you effectively manage your budget so that you’re not running deficits?

That’s a real big challenge for these little school districts that are trying to react to everything from meeting water regulations and needing a new well to dealing
with the price of fuel oil, to an influx of students that have specific needs, to three long-term subs or maternity leaves. You’re in a deficit position, and that drives your tax rate up. In a big system, you’re able to deal with that much more effectively, and intentionally. Instead of always reacting, you are being more proactive.

Board members repeatedly described how small districts struggled to amortize unexpected cost events. They explained how factors beyond their control often preempted their decisions on behalf of their local districts.

Finally, several board members pointed out that local control of school budgets is illusory for another reason, namely, because Vermont districts are part of an equalized, state-funded system. “I think that most people have the perception that we as a local school board have a lot of control over our budget, and that their tax rate is a result of largely spending decisions being made locally,” stated a Southern District board member, adding that local decisions determined only part of what figured on taxpayers’ property tax bill. The City District Chair explained the difference between public perception and financial reality this way:

We’re really funded statewide. A high amount of our money comes from the state. It’s very difficult sometimes for a local voter to understand. They’re voting on a local budget, but there are effects, that are affecting their tax rate, that are really driven by statewide events. That separation between the local vote on the expenses, really the funding that comes at the state level, has a natural conflict built into it that isn’t always easily resolvable.
Describing the only town in their supervisory union that voted to not join their recent merger, a Mountain District board member put it this way, “We’re not raising money in Appleton just for Appleton. The curious twist on this of course is Appleton receives more than it pays in, right?” Board members repeatedly complained that their constituents did not seem to understand that local districts no longer raised the exact amount of funds to operate their schools from local property taxes as they did in the 19th Century. Secretary Holcombe elaborated:

While many people still think that local funds pay for their town’s school it’s actually not true. We’re in a statewide funding system now, which is a good thing because it has helped improve equity across Vermont schools. Some people in small communities don’t realize that as much as 60% or 70% of their local budget really comes from the state education fund, and the irony is that they wouldn’t be able to raise the funds necessary to maintain some of the small schools we see with low student numbers. It would simply be unsustainable if they only had local funds to work with.

Board members suggested that many of their constituents did not understand that the local district was subject to many external factors as part of a statewide funding system. This disconnect between how schools were actually funded and the trope of autonomous local systems served as an example of how the idea of local control holds sway, despite significant changes to school funding in recent decades.

Local control is a widely held value in Vermont’s school governance systems; however, board members described the budgetary constraints of their small districts as a
significant limit on their decision-making power. Board members often found their local
district budgets to be predetermined largely by teacher contracts, energy prices, and other
operational factors beyond their control. Above all, smaller local districts were less well
positioned to financially absorb unanticipated cost events, which often resulted in staff or
program reductions in their local schools. Finally, board members stated that the public’s
lack of understanding of Vermont’s statewide funding system often caused them to
believe that boards had more local financial control than was the case.

Decision-Making Power

In addition to financial restraints, many board members noted that changes in
state statute had already removed many decisions from the purview of local district
boards. A Southern District board member observed that Act 153 had moved
administration of technology, transportation, and special education to the level of the
supervisory union, adding, “Most all of local control has disappeared and almost
everything now is controlled by the supervisory union.” However, a City District board
member found that, “The legal framework, in Vermont, that gives communities a lot of
say, we have home rule on a lot of things,” while another City District board member
disagreed, saying, “In a Vermont context there’s sort of an illusion of local control. I
mean when 86% of what you do is not controlled locally, how deep and authentic is local
control?” Yet another City District board member concluded, “Usually what we can
actually affect is at the edges, which are the non-mandated.”

Many board members stated that decisions about curriculum had also been taken
out of their hands. A Southern District board member stated, “You really cannot approve
a textbook. The superintendent does that. The supervisory union now does that for you.”

The City District Chair found that state requirements limited the scope of decisions about curriculum offerings. A Central District board member asserted that local control no longer existed in her experience:

There really isn’t any [local control]. Yeah, we might be able to control the dogcatcher or who gets elected, but when it comes to really the curriculums and structural methods, and hours of the school day, teachers’ salaries, that’s all done, most of the time, district-wide or even further out than that. It’s kind of a fallacy.

A Southern District board member saw the question of local control of curriculum in similar terms:

That’s one of the problems you have. You have no control over your curriculum. People think they’re going to go in to run the school, that the town is going to run the school, but the town doesn’t run the school. They have no control. They don’t even realize they have no control. It became crazy …

When board members described their local district’s actions regarding curriculum, they typically found that the important decisions had already been determined elsewhere. While there remained uncertainty as to the extent to which school governance implies curriculum oversight, board members said they did not find that they were able to exercise local control in the area of curriculum.

Above all, board members pointed to a significant discrepancy between the public’s expectations of local control and their actual experience as board members. “I think there really is a disconnect. I think people don’t realize…”, said a Southern District
board member. “I think [constituents] have a perception of local control even in many cases where they might not already have local control,” noted another Southern District board member. A Central District board member agreed, saying,

I think the concept of local control is a lot overblown. I think that the average person doesn’t realize how little control we actually have, and that there are a lot of things that we have to do because they’re mandated, or there are a lot of things that we can’t do because that’s the administrative job, and that the state tells us to do such-and-such and the feds tell us to do such-and-such. I think local control is something that is misunderstood and held dearly, so people like to hold onto a misperception in a way.

Board members repeatedly recounted the discordance between their local governance experiences and the public’s perception of local control. Moreover, many board members suggested that their local boards did not make important decisions, for example, in the areas of technology, transportation, special education, and curriculum.

The State Role

Given Vermonters’ cultural aversion to top-down decision-making, it was not surprising to occasionally hear some irreverent, or even derisive, comments directed at the state government when board members responded to an interview prompt showing the state capitol. Some board members called the legislature “The Golden Dome” or “The Golden Bubble”, a reference to the statehouse in Montpelier. A City District board member complained of a “quagmire of statewide education funding,” and a Southern District board member said that the legislature was “grasping at straws”. Another
Southern District board member stated, “I’m not particularly turned off by the legislature or, frankly, enamored with them.” The Central District Chair opined that there were many “unfunded mandates include legislation rushed and not quite right, not quite accurate legislation.” The Southern District Chair said he told his legislator that he was concerned the legislature was “doing too much”, adding, “The state short-changes in a number of ways. They put a lot of unfunded mandates on.” The Mountain District Superintendent said the legislature had given him plenty to work on, and pointed to Acts 68, 166, 46, 153, 156, and 77. “More of it is based in Montpelier now”, he observed. “I don’t see that going back. The question really is, how are we going to make the most of what we have?” Overall, board members interviewed expressed concern at the number of new education laws, most often referred to as “unfunded mandates”, which they said limited their ability to make decisions at the local level.

Still, despite some common critiques, many board members demonstrated a favorable view of the state government. The City District Chair stated:

I really think that the Vermont state government is highly supportive of public education. I see it as a very positive image. I understand that there’s always going to be budget issues. They do ask to hear from local districts, and they take it seriously that it’s a statewide obligation to fund education

He concluded by saying, “I don’t look at the state as handcuffing us too much.” The Southern District Chair seemed to give the state government the benefit of the doubt too, observing that the legislature is “a lot harder job than people give it credit for.” A Central District board member described Vermont state government as “incredibly accessible”,

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adding, “You can walk in there and talk to pretty much anybody and tell them who you are and why you’re there.” A Mountain District board member saw it in similar terms, saying, “In Montpelier, you can walk into the building. You can talk to legislators, and most of them will talk to you on the spot, even if it’s inconvenient for them.” While some board members expressed dissatisfaction with unfunded mandates and the rapid succession of new education laws in recent years, most appeared to hold a positive view of state government. It is equally important to note that no board members took issue with the merits of the new state education laws themselves. Upon analysis, Board members appeared to object to top-down mandates as a limit on local control, but seemed to agree with the general approach to education policy provided by the state government.

The creation of the cabinet-level position of Vermont Secretary of Education is another new development in the Vermont governance landscape. Formerly, the State Board of Education chose a Commissioner of Education to oversee schools in a parallel structure from the Governor’s administration, hopefully to insulate the position from the volatility of state politics. The new Secretary of Education, however, is selected from a list of Board of Education nominees by the Governor and reports directly to him. The VSA’s Jeff Francis explained,

The notion was, education is so important and consumed so much, by way of resources, that it’s logical to have a closer connection than we did to the Governor’s position. That law change was heavily debated. People basically fell on one of two arguments. Either promotion and effectiveness and the ability to use the resources of the Governor’s role to get the focus and attention you need in
an extremely important public endeavor, versus protection. You need to protect yourself from the political structure.

The City District Superintendent expressed reservations about consolidating control over education in the Governor’s cabinet, stating, “A Governor-appointed Secretary is very political. The Governor’s out of office, you’re probably gone. The Secretary has to toe the party line with the Governor or you’re not there. I think it’s actually the antithesis of local control.” The Southern District Chair said, “I always get concerned about adding politics to the decision-making process,” and a Southern District school board member agreed, stating, “I am not sure how this will impact local control. It makes the Secretary less independent and causes a more frequent turnover in the position which does not seem positive.” In fact, the most common concern was about “instability in our educational leader”. When asked about this concern, Secretary Holcombe replied,

It does imply a certain degree of instability because of the political aspect of the job, but it’s allowed me to work closely with the Governor and the Legislature to have a clear approach about what we’re trying to do to improve Vermont schools.

All things considered, board members seemed less concerned with a more directive role from the state, and more concerned with higher turnover in the position due to the Vermont governorship’s short two-year terms. While board members raised the dangers of turnover and politicization when discussing the new Secretary of Education position, they did not appear to object to the governor taking a more direct role in shaping education policy through the cabinet-level position.
In addition, many board members openly expressed admiration and respect for Secretary Holcombe, who had served in that role since 2013 and was reappointed by incoming Governor Phil Scott in 2017. “Rebecca’s done a fine job. She’s a fantastic secretary. She has a different voice,” said one Mountain District board member. The Mountain District Chair said he had “nothing but the upmost respect for her. She’s done a tremendous job, a very intelligent lady to begin with. She truly cares about the educational experience that the students are receiving in Vermont.” A Southern District board member said, “I think the Secretary, for the most part, has done a great job.” A Central District board member said of Secretary Holcombe:

Her heart’s really in the right place and I think she understands Vermont politics.

I think she understands governance. I think she understands how to run an agency. I think she’s a teacher’s teacher. I think she’s a superintendent’s superintendent.

Without exception, board members praised Secretary Holcombe for her work. While it is sometimes difficult to separate the person from the position, it appeared that effective education leadership at the state level was influencing how board members viewed this new role. At the very least, board members appeared to be open to taking direction from a capable Secretary of Education who shared their educational values.

Moreover, many board members clearly stated that they supported the idea of stronger state-level leadership through the new Secretary of Education position. “I think there’s an argument from a state perspective that you want an administration that’s cohesive and that’s working together and that is on the same page and it’s balancing
priorities,” suggested a Central District board member. “While I wasn’t an advocate for it, I’m seeing that it’s probably working okay in practice,” responded a City District board member when asked about the new role, and the City District Chair noted:

As a Cabinet-level position you get a situation where the Secretary of Education has the force of the bully pulpit and actually has the support that what she says is going to be the rule for the state. There is the force of the governor behind it. Several board members found that the Governor and Secretary should work together to forge a clear direction for education in Vermont. “He’s the CEO of the state. He has direct control of making sure that the educational system is the best it can be. I don’t think there’s a governor that wouldn’t want that,” explained a Southern District board member. A City District board member agreed, saying, “I think that accountability is good, and the profile, I think it helps to have the profile that secretary has, being accountable to the governor,” and also added, “It’s one more thing to evaluate the governor on.” The Southern District Superintendent also argued for strong leadership at the state level:

It should be front and center, and today most people believe strongly that economical development and education go hand in hand. You can’t really discuss the future of the state without having a solid understanding of what your education system should be.

While some board members objected to unfunded state mandates, they appeared to approve of the general direction of education policy in Vermont and to find advantages to having stronger education leadership at the state level. Equally important, board
members seemed to accept the value of new state laws and requirements in areas as wide-ranging as education funding, governance reform, prekindergarten, school quality standards, and high school graduation requirements, even if these changes curtailed local control on these matters.

**Federal Role**

While board members held a generally favorable view of the state government’s role in education, the opposite appeared to be true for the federal role. In response to an interview prompt showing the official seal of the U.S. Department of Education, the Central District Chair asserted, “That’s where the biggest battles are waged to the detriment of children.”. Other board members reacted by saying they found the federal role to be largely irrelevant in their experience. “In my 20-odd years as a school board member, I haven’t spent a lot of time looking at what the United States Department of Ed is really doing as education,” recounted the Mountain District Chair. When shown an interview prompt showing a pie chart of the local, state, and federal share of education funding in Vermont, board members often complained of unfunded, or underfunded, federal mandates. “It’s too bad the federal part is so small, given the amount of requirements that the feds have, especially special education,” observed a Central District board member. “They make mandates, but they’re never fully financed and funded. Which then adds on to the burden of the local budgets and the local control piece,” explained another Central District board member. Many board members expressed surprise at learning how little the federal share of education funding represented in local budgets. “The Department of Ed has really leveraged a very small amount of funding
percentage-wise into trying to transform the way that teaching and learning takes place,” stated the City District Chair. While few board members complained of NCLB accountability measures, the City District Superintendent shared that she was forced to fire a principal under those federal rules. Board members also pointed to chronically underfunded special education requirements and standardized testing as federally imposed burdens that reduced local control and made their work more difficult.

While board members repeatedly expressed concern about standardized testing, and whether schools do too much testing, they had a generally favorable impression of the Common Core State Standards. “We need to keep some type of assessment that we can measure between communities and measure between states,” stated a Mountain District board member. A City District board member found the need for “a common language that we speak across” but insisted that Common Core had to “allow for some local flavor”. Another City District board member found that the “fear and anxiety about the white washing standardization that would come with a national curriculum is overblown.” The Central District Board Chair said, “I’ve always felt that standards are important,” and a Southern District board member argued for students to have a “minimum core educational understanding to be able to survive in the global world.” A Mountain District board member concluded, “They’re rigorous. They make sense. They’re relevant.” Another Southern District board member shared, “I am a big fan of Common Core. Common Core is not a federal program. Common Core is a program that is adopted by 37 individual states.”
Still, even if board members did not appear to see Common Core as encroaching on local decisions about curriculum, they expressed concern about over-testing. “We’re generating a generation of people that are focused on knowing how to very quickly answer questions that have complete answers to them, and have the stamina to answer a lot of them,” warned a Southern District board member. While pleased that the Smarter Balanced assessment used computer adaptive testing and included built-in accommodations, a Mountain District board member worried that standards-related pressure could get “pushed down” on younger students, whether they were ready or not. Board members also opposed over-reliance on testing, with another Mountain District board member noting, “It’s absurd to think that you would say that one test, one day, is going to be the measure of whether a school is good or bad.” So while board members did not appear to object national testing or standards as taking over local control of the curriculum, they did express concern about keeping testing in its proper place.

Board members interviewed described several limits on local control in their work on school boards. First of all, they agreed that the limited resources of small local districts, and their struggle to deal with unexpected cost events, restricted or predetermined many board decisions. Some board members recounted tough choices about staff or program reductions forced on their boards because of an unexpected increase in special education costs, a decline in enrollment, or a pressing facilities problem. Board members also found that teacher contracts and operational costs largely dictated their annual budget, leaving them with little room to guide the direction of the district. Board members said that the public often failed to understand that state law
requires the supervisory union to administer curriculum, technology, transportation, and other services, and not the local district. Board members also found that many taxpayers were unclear as to how the statewide equalized funding system impacted local districts’ budgets. Finally, board members appeared to hold a favorable view of stronger education policy leadership at the state level, and generally saw value in Common Core for cross-state comparisons of student achievement. Finally, board members expressed resentment of underfunded federal requirements that made their work more difficult. Taken together, board members identified several limits on local control from the standpoint of resources as well as statutory authority.

The Future of Local Control

With declining student enrollment raising questions about the viability of Vermont’s smallest districts, and with many local districts considering mergers with neighboring districts, school board members expressed optimism about many of the changes school boards may see in the coming years. From improved capacity to intradistrict choice, many board members said that streamlined governance structures would allow districts to focus more attention and resources on student learning outcomes. Board members also described the opportunity for restructured boards to take on a stewardship role and provide training for board members to clarify their role in school governance. Many board members also suggested that Vermonters redefine “local” in broader terms, in order to see beyond their local school, beyond their local district, and consider larger governance systems in the interest of equity for all Vermont students.
Streamlined Governance

Many board members expressed support for new streamlined governance structures through the Act 46 unification process in the coming years, as well as concerns about the loss of local control. Several board members said they hoped that unified districts would provide more operational capacity by consolidating resources, which would lead to more opportunities for students, including expanded intradistrict choice for students. Many also predicted that simplified governance structures would allow them to find and retain talented superintendents and principals for their districts. Board members often found their local governance structures to be too small to be effective, but worried about weakening the strong connections many towns have with their local public schools.

Even if board members exhibited pride in the Vermont traditions of participatory government and acting locally, many found that, when it comes to local governance, there is such a thing as too small. With many local district boards overseeing a single school, it was clear that many Vermonters still defined local at the building level. The City Superintendent found that oftentimes, “The local definition of community seems to be: as close to the school as you can get.” To illustrate, she gave the example of three Vermont elementary schools in close driving distance, each with their own local school board, and with a combined enrollment of less than 100 students. “You have fewer curriculum offerings. You have fewer resources to offer what you can,” she concluded. A Mountain District board member described governance in his one-school local district this way:
I used to say there’s a school board member for every classroom. People would first laugh. Then, they would realize that I’m serious and that we really did have five classrooms and five school board members. That’s not a bad thing, but it’s really ... I don’t think it’s the best way.

A Southern District board member took note of some small neighboring districts, each with a five-person board that oversaw schools with student enrollments of 50, 48, and 16, respectively. “I just don’t think that our little five-person [local district board], with the support of our community, is in a position without support from a higher level to actually provide the best for our students,” stated the Southern District Chair. “The individual school level for total governance for the school system is too low. It is too cumbersome to manage the system,” he added. A Mountain District board member observed:

Goldilocks comes to mind, because there is too small. I think most people agree there is too small for a school. We might not exactly agree what that looks like, but there is definitely too small, and I think that from my perspective, and I think a lot of people in town would agree that our old school, the district at least, was too small. There is too small, too granular, and you’re too occupied with stuff that you don’t need to know.

A City District board member seemed to agree, saying, “The possibility for more micro concerns to be expressed or lobbied for can stand in the way of alignment and more macro sort of approach.” Many board members suggested that local governance would need to look beyond the town or neighborhood school in the coming years. While
demonstrating pride in Vermont’s local governance tradition, they found that hyper-local entities did not always make for improved opportunities for students.

The continuing need for streamlined governance structures appeared to be not just a question of size, but also of coherence. With supervisory unions overseeing both operating and non-operating districts, often with schools for various grade clusters that differ but overlap, communication and coordination across local boards posed significant challenges. The Mountain District Chair described the need for his district’s recent merger, explaining:

The communication just wasn’t happening. It takes forever to get anything done. Again, you’re hearing different points of view in that. This was hindering the educational experience that the students were receiving. There’s no doubt about it. We were very slow in keeping up to the changes in that. In this day and age, things happen even quicker and faster because of technology and other components in society that allow for that to increase at a rate that local school boards simply couldn’t keep up with.

The VSA’s Jeff Francis agreed that Vermont’s patchwork of local districts and supervisory unions made it harder for districts to work in unison toward improving student learning outcomes, noting:

It’s difficult to do anything in Vermont with efficiency, fidelity, and universal quality because of the desperate nature of the delivery system. The government structures and their capacity to respond are just as disparate an aspect of the system as any other aspect of the system.
A Southern District board member said, “There are way too many school boards. Our supervisory union is a great example. We have 13 boards I think?” A Mountain District board member agreed, saying, “I don’t think we need that many school board members and the reason is because I look at the job as being something completely different.” The VSBA’s Nicole Mace agreed that small, overly complex governance structures led to a certain approach, saying, “When you have a fragmented structure, when you have no entity that’s responsible for the K-12 program, who ultimately is accountable for high school graduation rates? Who ultimately is accountable for kindergarten readiness?” As it related to student outcomes, Vermont’s multitude of overlapping school boards and governance structures appeared to pose significant problems. While board members clearly valued local governance traditions, many found that future governance reforms were needed in order for Vermont to create streamlined systems that could better meet student learning needs.

“Act 46 to me is all about economic development, having a rational system in place to really husband our resources, but also focus them,” explained the Southern District Superintendent, when asked about district mergers underway or on the horizon. The Mountain District Chair shared a similar view about focusing resources, saying:

In the short time we’ve been merged, financially it’s been a big benefit. We’re seeing the curriculum discussions we’re able to have. Things we’re able to look at we couldn’t before. We’re looking at language immersion program, which is something we probably couldn’t have had before, but the fact that we’re now taking strengths from all our schools and sharing them, sharing our personnel.
Teachers and staff are having discussions that they just couldn’t have before becoming one district.

The Mountain District Superintendent said that the new unified district structure created more capacity with shared resources, but also allowed for a “common philosophy”, adding, “That’s probably the most powerful thing. It’s not a potpourri approach. It’s comprehensive, it’s intentional, it’s well-resourced, and it’s done with a certain level of fidelity, and everybody’s on the same timeline.” Looking ahead, a Southern District board member stated, “I believe the advantages are in the ability to offer more opportunities for students. I think the advantages outweigh the disadvantages, and there are ways to involve people other than having a local board.” Another Southern District board member agreed, saying,

You would be able to level out the classes. Your classes would be, in terms of teachers, a more effective use of resources. Your kids would have more opportunities. With small districts, your social opportunities, your academic opportunities, your growth opportunities are really restricted.

Several Mountain District board members found that unification allowed their district to innovate, share staff, and “level the playing field of student experiences” to ensure consistent opportunities across schools. “We’re able to establish more long-term visions and goals where we want the dollars to be going to”, concluded the Mountain District Chair. Many board members agreed that the unification of local districts would allow them to better marshal and direct resources towards improving student learning opportunities.
In addition to improved capacity from consolidating resources, board members predicted that larger, unified districts could better absorb unforeseen cost events. “You can respond to shifts in the population,” noted a Mountain District board member. “Fluctuations are off-set,” said a Southern District board member, adding, “Grouping the larger numbers definitely has helped to level out the bumps and dips in the budget.” Another Mountain District board member described how unification helped protect schools from unexpected cost events:

We’re able to address, as well as financially, those problems that occur throughout a year. If a boiler goes down in a school, or we’re trying to pave a parking lot, or updating the computers, whatever it is, as a merged district we’re able to address those needs more effectively and efficiently as a board than we were before. It really came down to we need to work together more often than we are.

Given the hardship many small districts faced when encountering unexpected financial events, board members appeared to see larger, unified governance structures as a way to safeguard their schools from adverse budget events in the years to come.

When thinking ahead about possible disadvantages to unifying local districts through governance reform, the most frequent concern board members conveyed was that communities could feel disconnected from their local schools. “The risk of it is communities may end up feeling estranged from their school systems,” the Southern District Chair stated. A Southern District board member agreed, saying, “The disadvantage is that local people will feel more removed from their schools.” However,
another Southern District board member argued that smaller districts were more nimble and said:

Local control, the real power of local control is the ability to shift what you’re doing in education to meet the most current needs that are going to benefit those students. At a larger board level, it’s like trying to move the Rock of Gibraltar.

It’s not really going to happen, even if it’s going to hurt masses of kids.

A Mountain District board member also expressed reservations about bigger governance entities, stating, “If the size becomes too big, there is a fear of the unknown when you are combining different unions or districts.” While most board members found significant advantages to streamlining governance structures, some also expressed apprehension about what they might lose in the process. As one City District board member put it, “The technical isn’t as hard as the adaptive change, an affective realm. In the realm of emotion, that’s the hard work.”

Board members also expressed concern about future small school closings, but expected that Vermont’s geography meant that small schools would likely continue to exist for the foreseeable future. A Mountain District board member pointed out:

You can’t get from here to there. It’s only two miles as the crow flies, but it’s half an hour on a school bus…There are going to be places where you need small schools. You need a small building, because that’s not worth putting a kindergartner on a bus for an hour. It’s not good for them. It’s not good for anybody.
In support of small schools, a Southern District board member stated, “The real hope, the future of America, lies in our little small school model.” Another Southern District board member said, “The disadvantage, of course, is geography. You have the idea of families being split up, where families are in different schools where they wouldn’t have been.” However, the Southern District Chair found that, “Act 46 has forced people to actually open up their eyes and start realizing that one, you have to do it and maybe it’s not that bad after all. We want to continue to maintain that local tie of community to school.”

The Mountain District Superintendent also insisted that unified governance was not about small school closures, saying, “When I think about consolidation, I don’t think about closing schools, I think about sharing resources. Not closing schools.” In addition, it is important to note that Act 46 has a grandfather provision that effectively will allow small districts to block small school closures for up to three years following a merger. With larger governance entities likely in the coming years, many board members expressed unease about the future of Vermont’s small schools; however, most appeared to think that many small schools would continue to exist due to Vermont’s geography.

Public school choice within new, larger districts was a possible outcome of Act 46 that board members most often saw as an advantage. Several board members from all four districts expressed enthusiasm for expanding intradistrict choice as a way to allow parents to have to select the school that makes the most sense for their children, whether or not that falls within their town’s boundaries. The City District Superintendent described how the creation of magnet schools within her district led to increased parent engagement and schools with more heterogeneous student populations. “We’ve actually
realized with the magnet schools, which really have a theme, a different way of teaching, a chance to opt in,” she explained. “What the magnet schools did to our system is open up choice in the elementary schools. Now [one school] is looking at a STEM program. People will go where the programs are.” Whether for reasons of program or proximity, many board members suggested that larger, unified districts could lead to expanded intradistrict choice in the coming years.

**A Redefined Role**

Many board members also found that future and current governance reforms offered the chance to redefine the role of school boards in the coming years. Some board members suggested that streamlined governance structures would allow them to focus more often on questions of education than governance. Several board members said that boards needed to spend more time on policy than operational issues. Some board members predicted the need for more board training or ways to “professionalize” work on school boards. Other board members insisted on the importance of community engagement. Still others found that building-based school councils could keep parents and community members connected to their local schools, while others warned against the danger of “rubber stamp” school boards.

Thinking about the future of local control in Vermont, some board members said they hoped that streamlined governance structures would allow them to focus more on educational issues. The Mountain District Chair stated:
I don’t see school boards going anywhere, but I do see it hopefully downsizing to where it’s a broader discussion that needs to be taking place in order to, again, provide the maximized educational experience we want our kids to achieve.

Vermont School Boards Association Executive Director Nicole Mace reported that current unification efforts are already resolving some of the confusion around formerly complex local governance structures, saying, “Several of the Act 46 merger study committee reports feature before and after organizational charts. The before organizational chart, you could not untangle. The after organizational chart is orderly with clear lines of delineation.” A Central District board member anticipated the same result, explaining, “Just going from 50 board members to 13, from multiple boards to one goal, in terms of focusing on what’s important. We’re going to spend less time on governance and more time on education. Without a doubt.” The Central District Superintendent agreed, and raised the question of where local democracy’s place in local school governance:

To me, local control is not about what’s happening for students. It’s about how do I exercise my power as a citizen in my community, which is where it gets complex in terms of the operations of a school which has to make decisions that aren’t always immediately accessible to the general public, in terms of an understanding and where there can be tension about is the school a local center or is the school an educational institution. What is the main purpose and function of a school?
The Southern District Chair described how his board experience had given him a new perspective and new insights about the role of local governance:

My thinking’s evolved over the years actually. I continue to be a big believer in the best way to run things is to push the decision making as local as possible. However, as I learn more and more about the schools and how they operate, the myriad of requirements, whether regulatory reporting, grant funding, grant approvals, management, even issues like curriculum, and different approaches we’ve taken, I’ve seen the great advantage of having a bigger entity being able to manage that.

Mace also predicted that larger districts and unified structures would enable boards to focus more on educational goals instead of getting mired in operations, saying, “I’d say a unified board will by necessity, unless they form a lot of committees, will by necessity have to pay attention to the big picture issues.” Many board members expressed optimism that streamlining governance structures in the coming years would permit school boards to pay more attention to education, and less to governance.

Along the same lines, many board members recommended a more forward-looking, policy-driven role for boards in the coming years. A Southern District board member explained the shift in this way:

Very few people understand that if you take a long-term approach and really look at the values and you really look at ends policies and all the rest, we still have enormous potential for impact, and that a lot of the changes that people want to
make, if you look at the potential long-term implications they’re disastrous.

They’re disastrous.

The Southern District Chair agreed, adding:

It got away from we didn’t know how to do our basic mission in providing direction for the school. Policy governance allowed us to get into the policies, the monitoring, and separate policies from procedures. I had never heard of separating policies from procedures. It was huge.

The Southern Superintendent stated that a more forward-looking, ends-driven governance approach would lead to better results, observing:

All too often boards in Vermont, I don’t know if it’s historical tradition or whatever, they think control of the means because that’s what they can wrap their head around. They give up their authority over the ends, which is really their authority. The professionals inside the organization become in charge of the ends. The board tries to meddle with the means. Unfortunately the result is, you can’t hold administration accountable because you don’t tell them what needs to be done, but furthermore you’re now controlling the means by which they would do it anyway.

The Central District Chair similarly found:

The most important aspects of local control are oversight and expectations regarding fiscal responsibility and outcomes. I think we have the most impact when we are vigilant in monitoring that, and expressing what our expectations are, and asking questions to be answered.
A Mountain District board member also supported a higher-level approach, adding, “The setting priorities. Where we put our money. I feel like we do have an element of local control for that.” A City District board member was also in favor of the approach, saying, “Setting policy at the board level? Absolutely.” A Central District board member said, “We as board members will put out the guardrails or the parameters and say, politically, what we’re feeling in our community.” Mace concluded, “It’s about setting priorities, expectations, aspirations, and doing everything you can to make sure you’re getting there.” Several board members emphasized that local control should not be synonymous with managing buildings, and should instead be more focused on policy and monitoring outcomes. Many board members suggested that school governance would need to become more forward-looking and ends-oriented in the years to come.

Many board members suggested more training to clarify board roles in the coming years. “I think we need to elevate the role of school board members and I think it needs to be much more defined and I think that they need education,” said a Mountain District board member. Another Mountain District board member agreed:

I think that the problem really lies in the role of the school board member… If we had a tighter reign on really what we were supposed to be doing as a job description then that number would mean something and also our role would be very consistent from place to place.

“I could see that we might need to have a more professional level of school board down the road, and it would probably…It can’t be in every town,” said a City District board member. “I do think that there needs to be a greater understanding of roles and
responsibilities between boards and the professionals they hire to run the schools,” stated the City District Superintendent. “I think with more streamlined governance and a continued emphasis on professional development for board members, that we’ll have a more informed leadership pool,” concluded a Central District board member. Quoting Vermont education leader Ray Proulx, the Southern District Superintendent said.

To really collaborate, everyone needs to understand each other’s role. I have a job as superintendent. You have a job as a board member. You have a job as a principal. Only when we fully understand that, can we collaborate.

A Central District board member seemed to concur, stating, “For me, Act 46 was a way to clean that up and eliminate that conflict of interest between the principal and the board and its superintendent.” To that end, Secretary Holcombe issued a report in 2015, as required by Act 46, Section 47, to clarify the roles of boards, superintendents, principals, and local councils (Appendix C). Likewise, many board members said that they hoped that current governance reforms would help clarify their governance role. In addition to a clear focus on educational outcomes, many board members recommended additional training for school boards so that they have a clear understanding of their role in local governance.

Board members also said that school boards should invest more in community engagement in the coming years. “I’m not sure we probably do a good enough job at communicating. Which is hard as heck,” said the Southern District Chair. The Southern Superintendent agreed, adding, “I think that’s where the local board can be very powerful, to be that sort of trustee liaison between the community and the school to
engage the community.” A Southern District board member also saw community engagement as playing a crucial role:

Be clear on what the values are, and the long-term goals. That’s what an ends policy is. The ends policies are saying what do we want our students to become when they graduate? What abilities do we want them to have? How are we going to get there?

A City District board member found “the most important reality is to have good community relations, so that they at least understand why we’re spending the money we do, because we have to have our budgets voted on every year.” Another City District board member explained the importance of engaging the community by saying, “The advantage is it allows you to craft a more collective narrative which is sustainable and is the right thing to do. Our existence is much more dependent on what we do collectively than what we do individually.” A Mountain District board member concluded, “I think not just governing boards, but probably the organization of education in every setting needs to include communication work more.” Board members repeatedly emphasized the importance of community engagement, and also predicted that boards would need to concentrate more work in this area in the years ahead.

Identifying and fostering local values was another role where board members saw great potential in the coming years. “The number one thing for local control is for the boards to get their values organized, to come up with the ends policies, but to get their values organized,” explained a Southern District board member. A Central District board member found importance in “that sort of sense that we’re in this together and we have to
work through it.” City District board members also emphasized the importance of developing “a local identity” that reflected community assets and pointed to diversity, food systems, and the environment as important local values. “As far as building program…it’s reacting to the kids. That is very local,” a City District board member explained. The Central District Superintendent saw the question of local values in similar terms, and emphasized that boards would need to step into a more elevated role of stewardship to do so:

I see the board’s role in maintaining that identity and connection of community to school as a critical role, but it has to depart from traditional roles that boards have played in Vermont, which have been very much boots on the ground, taking care of leaky pipes, and really doing the role of administration in a lot of instances.

Board members identified the importance of developing and articulating local values as an essential role for boards to play in the coming years.

Some board members suggested that building-based local school councils could ensure continued parent involvement at the school level; however, others warned that school boards need to avoid falling into a strictly advisory role. School board members from Central, Southern and City Districts all used the expression “rubber stamp” to warn that boards need to continue to play an important oversight and governance role. “I think that school boards still need to be active, and not just rubber stamp boards…We still need to have active boards who really understand on a very personal level what’s happening in our schools,” a Central District board member explained. When asked about possibly having fewer members on her board, a City District board member said,
It would feel like a lot of rubber-stamping. It would be like a sounding board. I just didn’t get the sense that it wouldn’t have a lot of impact, ironically, being smaller, because you’d probably only have two or three committees.

The Southern District Chair pointed to the Massachusetts mandate of local school councils to solicit input, and agreed the community discussions were significant, adding, “It’s important to continue to have a way to have connections.” A Mountain District board member pointed to the fact that the Vermont Educational Quality Standards provide for school councils where local boards may no longer exist, adding that a “go-between communication arm of the organization has enormous potential” but warned that, “You don’t want the Community Council to weigh in on every teacher dispute or whatever it might be either.” Looking ahead, as some local boards disappear through the process of unification, board members appeared to see a role for local school councils to play in local schools; however, they warned that school boards must not become advisory in nature.

Redefining Local

Many board members reported that Act 46 merger discussions and studies had forced them to rethink what, exactly, “local” means. A Mountain District board member pointed to the fact that since their local districts had shared the same union high school for 40 years, they might finally know each other well enough to merge. “I mean, come on, we’re all neighbors and our kids play sports together. It might be time to give [a merger] some thought,” she stated. The VSA’s Jeff Francis agreed, asserting, “The communities that are created by our children are generally broader, wider, more diverse,
more technologically reliant, more free in terms of thought processes, than adult communities.” A Southern District shared a related tale of two towns, recounting, “Those two communities were rivals, were sports rivals for 50 years. It was such an effort to merge those two school districts because of that. The kids had less trouble, but the adults, the adults really disliked them together.” A Central District board member said, “I think in order to be a really holistic board member you have to look beyond just your local school.” A City District board member said similarly,

Taking the local out a couple levels could be helping all of us at some level. It probably has led me to believe that we don’t have to have everything controlled as much at the smaller level. The local control, local could be bigger defined.

That’s probably a change that’s come while I’ve been on the board.

A Central District board member agreed, asserting:

I think that Vermonters have a kind of strange definition of local. If you want to break it down to "local" and "control", "local" is hyper-local in Vermont. There are these towns of 300 or 400 people, and that’s their town, their identity. To me it seems like, I’ve said this a lot of times, the definition of "local" should be expanded, that we should embrace a larger local… all of our kids know each other, they go to preschool together, and then they go to kindergarten, go off into different places, and suddenly we’re not the same community anymore. It seems to me that "local" is really skewed in Vermont and to the detriment to our communities.
The Central District Superintendent agreed, saying, “We’re still stuck in this very outdated idea of what local is, because it’s stuck along these town lines that don’t really mean what they did at one point.” Looking ahead to the implications for small towns as they reorganize into larger, unified districts through Act 46 mergers, Francis noted, “We’re not going to lose a lot. We’re going to gain. We’re going to redefine community in a way that makes sense to us because we’ve been working as a bigger community for the past several years.”

To start, some board members encouraged their colleagues to look beyond a school-level view. “Almost the shell of the building is like really important so they freak out about the control of that building like it’s an asset that they could sell,” shared a Mountain District board member. The Central District Chair agreed, saying:

I think that local control in education has evolved pretty dramatically and has come quite a distance from where it was 20, and certainly 30 or 40 years ago when you were on a school board and you were responsible for keeping the furnace going if it was a cold day and it failed. You were literally involved in operations and management of the school. Some of the people who have been around for a while still have that conception.

Mace found that defining the local district solely by the town school tended to lead to a certain governance approach, and a narrower perspective, explaining:

The structure itself reinforces a role. If you’re a board member looking only at your school, that’s a very different framework for thinking about all the kids in this wider community, pre-K through 12, maybe even through 16. I do think that
that would inevitably lead to a different conceptualization and hopefully implementation of what your role is. We’re all challenged by different dimensions of this work, but I do think structure reinforces behavior.

The Mountain District Chair agreed, describing how his community has redefined local since merging into a unified district:

One of the reasons we did the merger is we always truly felt that every student in our district is part of our family. It doesn’t matter where you come from in the district. That’s even more so now that we have merged. It’s a 15-member board, we think of every kid as part of the family, as I said, no matter where you are in the learning spectrum, no matter where you come from. We value our teachers, staff, administrators, central office personnel and all that the same way. We’re all in this together.

As their local districts engaged in Act 46 merger discussions, board members found that their definition of local was expanding. “I can’t abide by a decision that says their fate and our fate are not intertwined. I think we have to acknowledge that we’re in this together,” said a Mountain District board member describing neighboring local districts. Many board members suggested the need for a broader view of local control beyond the traditional town school.

Some board members sought to extend the definition of local even further, and spoke to how interconnected districts are across Vermont. A Southern District board member observed:
I think when people realize that we are all sharing the same dollars, then it behooves you to really get out there and understand who your real, true neighbors are. That’s where that local piece comes in and I see Vermont as a whole.

A City District board member expressed a similar sentiment, saying, “It doesn’t mean that it’s not local concerns, but they flow up. They’re local concerns in the context of supporting this larger vision for Vermont.” Another City District board member said:

I really wish that there was a way that public school didn’t have to feel like I was competing with my neighboring schools. I felt like public education was this broader asset. We’re not necessarily competing with each other. We’re all trying to make the whole system better, and I don’t know...To me, partly local control means competition.

Using a food analogy, a Central District board member asked, “What does Localvore mean? What does it mean to buy local? It went from 25 miles to 50 miles to 100 miles to regions, and at some point you have to define whatever it is you’re trying to find.” The Central District Superintendent agreed, asserting:

I just think it’s imperative now that we’re moving towards more unified districts that there’s a shift in paradigm in terms of how we see our communities and our schools, and that we start to expand our identities beyond our towns.

Time and again, board members observed that their districts were part of a statewide funding system, and some pointed out that Vermont’s total student population is smaller than many school districts in other states. Board members repeatedly described how,
over time, their thinking had become more regional, and much broader than their local district.

Throughout, board members repeatedly expressed a commitment to equity. Several board members showed enthusiasm about the ability of a unified district to support program across various local districts. For example, the Southern District merger report quotes a board member as saying, “All of our kids are all of our kids.” The Southern District Chair also took a broader view, saying, “Once you create a higher level entity that is overseeing more kids. You tend to add more quality of opportunity, I think, in those districts.” A Mountain District board member looked forward to addressing what he saw as inequity in program offerings across local districts. He said, “It becomes everyone’s in or everyone’s out scenario, or what’s best for each school and then we find the funding as a supervisory district to accomplish that. We get to equity in that regard.” A Central District board member noted, “There are some communities that are able to put more into their schools than others. That’s definitely true, I’ve seen that here in our own little local microcosm, and it’s definitely true state-wide.” The Central District Chair stated:

Well, we get to equity much more quickly, using our [unified district] as an example. We’ve got some towns that struggle economically. We’ve got some towns that have a very small student population. We’ve got some towns that have extremely high levels of socioeconomic accomplishment. We have big schools and small schools.
A City District board member said he was committed to “this equity premise and that we all sacrifice something beyond what we might do if we were only considering ourselves.” He said that the statewide funding system created by Acts 60 and 68 had improved equity; however, he also saw a need for communities to “affirm something larger than what’s happening in my backyard” adding, that it “might require some sacrifice”. Many board members exhibited a strong commitment to creating equitable opportunities for students. Many of them also expressed hope that unifying small local districts could help in this regard.

As they considered the future of local control, many school board members appeared optimistic about many of the changes underway and expected in the coming years. Many board members expressed hope that streamlined governance structures would allow them to pay more attention to educational outcomes than questions of governance. They also saw governance restructuring as an opportunity to redefine the role of board member with special consideration given to policy, ends monitoring, community engagement, and local values. Finally, they emphasized the importance of taking a broader view of what local means in order to ensure equitable learning opportunities for all Vermont students.

**Chapter Summary**

The school board members interviewed for this study expressed pride in Vermont’s local school governance traditions and also provided several key insights into the social construct of local control. Board members described the importance of participatory democracy and Vermont’s grassroots political culture, but also warned
against the dark side of local control, particularly when it is synonymous with pet agendas or parochial viewpoints. Board members also pointed out that local control is sometimes misunderstood or understood in a wide-ranging number of ways. Board members repeatedly spoke to the importance of keeping communities connected with their local schools, but also related challenges caused by board micromanagement, which may contribute to high principal and superintendent turnover in Vermont schools. Finally, board members expressed optimism about clear roles from streamlined governance and supported a focus on policy, student outcomes, and community engagement for school boards in the years to come.
CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

A Vermont Case Study

This research explored local control of schools through the lens of school board members’ perspectives and experiences. The study was conducted at an interesting moment in Vermont education history. Faced with declining student enrollment, local school districts around the state are engaged in mergers or merger discussions under Act 46. In addition, Vermont represents an extreme case when it comes to local school governance: it is the state with the most school board members per student, and its myriad governance structures and small local districts reflect a long tradition of local control.

This case study examined the question of local control as a social construct by giving primacy to school board members’ voices and triangulating data with information provided by superintendents, policymakers, and related documents. The subunits of the Vermont case were the four districts selected from around the state for their distinct characteristics as defined by geography, governance, and demographics. Structured interviews composed of a series of visual prompts and standardized open-ended questions formed the primary source of data for the study.

Limitations of the Study

The purpose of this research was limited to the question of local control of schools as a social construct. The study did not seek to compare various governance models, analyze the demographic make-up of school boards, or assess the financial costs and benefits of district consolidation. The scope of the research centered on the
supervisory union or supervisory district level, and did not seek to examine each of the local districts within. In districts encompassing several local boards, the sample represented a smaller proportion of the total number of board members in the district. The data collection was limited to four districts from around the state, and excluded governance outliers such as inter-state districts and vocational/tech centers, for example. Each participant was only interviewed once, and each interview lasted 90 minutes or less.

While the strategy of starting interviews with image-based prompts was intended to provide for open-ended inquiry, it must be noted that my selection of the images was subject to researcher bias, for example, a much loved portrait of a town meeting, or a depiction of parents who appear to be white and upper-middle class. Furthermore, while the use of image-based prompts was intended to avoid putting words in participants’ mouths, it is important to note that images, like words, are often value-laden.

The interviews were limited to a maximum of five board members at each site, and the data sampling may reflect bias since a chain-referral technique was used, starting with each district’s superintendent. Given the fact that an estimated 51% of Vermont school board members are women, they were under-represented in this sample; approximately one-third of all participating board members self-identified as female.

**Principal Findings**

The section that follows will discuss the principal findings from this case study of school governance, namely that 1) multiple meanings of local control coexist, 2) statutory requirements and limited local resources curtail the exercise of local control in practice, and 3) school boards are starting to take a broader view of governance by emphasizing
stewardship over micromanagement and redefining local communities beyond town boundaries.

**Multiple Meanings of Local Control Coexist**

While local control is a cherished ideal in Vermont, there is high variability in the meaning ascribed to the concept. Annual town meetings, local select boards, and school boards are important institutions in Vermont’s political culture, which is largely defined by an ethos of independence and participatory democracy. Vermont education history is marked by the tug and pull of control over schools between local districts and the state government, and vestiges of the self-governed, self-operated common school still permeate notions of what local control means for many Vermonters.

School board members expressed pride in their pivotal role in school governance, and found that local district boards served to connect community members to their local schools. However, board members did question how broadly their communities are represented on local boards, and recounted having to recruit for board vacancies. School board members pointed to the discordance between the “myth” of local control and their experiences serving on school boards, finding that many board members and community members often confused the role of governance with operations and management. Board members reported that this often contributed to confusion as to the proper roles of board members, principals, and superintendents.

Finally, while clearly valuing local school governance, some board members pointed out the dark side of local control, including the history of civil rights in the US. In addition to its positive side, Board members said they had observed negative
dimensions of local control, including parochialism, pet agendas, high administrator turnover, and a tendency to be backward-looking instead of oriented toward the future. Some board members also reflected the view that parental control and local control are synonymous.

**Local Control is Limited by Statutory Requirements and a Lack of Resources**

School board members also described their ability to exercise local control as being curtailed by limited resources, as well as state and federal mandates. Board members pointed to the fact that teacher contracts and operational costs predetermine most of the annual budget, leaving boards with little discretionary spending. Board members also explained that smaller local districts are less able to absorb unexpected cost events, which often forces boards to cut program and staffing, sometimes against their best wishes. Finally, board members recognized that their districts were part of an equalized statewide funding system, which meant that local district budgets are always shaped by external factors beyond their control.

School board members also pointed to how their decision-making power was circumscribed by state and federal mandates, effectively leaving them with less local control than is believed to exist by the public. While board members took issue in particular with unfunded federal mandates, they agreed there is a need for national standards, providing that schools do not over-test students. While board members expressed some dissatisfaction with the quantity of new state education laws in recent years, they did not object to their substance. Board members also found that the state government has an important role to play in shaping education policy, including the
governor, notably through the newly created cabinet-level position of secretary of education.

**School Boards are Taking a Broader View of Local Control with Equity in Mind**

School board members expressed optimism about streamlining governance structures in the coming years. They found that Vermont’s overlapping, complex governance structures sometimes contribute to confusion or inefficiency. Board members also questioned the value of having local district boards for populations sometimes as low as a few dozen students. They expressed hope that governance reform will allow boards to be more policy-driven and forward-looking, with a sharp focus on educational outcomes. Board members also exhibited optimism that streamlined governance structures would help clarify board roles with board training. Some board members suggested that school councils could help keep schools connected to community members in the coming years, but insisted that school boards need to maintain their governance role and not an advisory one. Board members agreed that more could be done in the area of community engagement in the coming years, and that boards have an important role to play in providing stewardship of unique local values.

School board members said that local control was too narrow when too closely identified with the neighborhood school, and found that they were beginning to redefine “local” beyond their town boundaries to include their neighbors in nearby local districts. Board members also expressed a deep commitment to equity and said they hoped that district unification could improve equitable learning opportunities across local districts. Some also noted the state of Vermont was small enough to be considered a single,
statewide system, and that they supported equity for all students across the state.

**Conclusion**

“Local control” are two words that inspire a great deal of passion in Vermont, and in many other places as well. Just the same, the expression represents an ill-defined social construct that sometimes serves as a trump card in policy debates, without elucidating any possible solutions to the challenges faced by school boards, administrators, and policymakers. Only close examination of how local control is experienced in specific governance contexts can provide us with new insights on the difference between myth and reality, reveal the extent to which local control still exists, and identify which aspects of local governance are important to preserve in the coming years.

Vermont is a case study of interest because it has successfully maintained important local governance traditions for over 200 years. Nevertheless, it is currently midstream in the most significant school governance reforms the state has seen in over a century. Vermont voters approved over two-thirds of the district mergers presented at their 2017 town meetings, and it is estimated that approximately 60% of Vermont students will attend school in a consolidated district before the end of the year (Danitz Pache, 2017, March 15). It is also important to note that each of the supervisory unions participating in this study have now become supervisory districts. VSBA Director Nicole Mace interpreted Vermont’s 2017 Town Meeting Day results this way:

As you can see by yesterday’s historic results, Vermont’s school board members have risen to the challenges posed by declining enrollment, rising costs,
leadership turnover, and growing inequality in student opportunity, and are charting a positive course forward for public education in Vermont. (Danitz Pache, 2017, March 8, para. 20)

In conclusion, the real question is not whether or not local control of schools is good or bad, but rather, which beneficial aspects of local governance should be preserved, even as governance structures change. The findings from this study appear to show that Vermonters would like to uphold certain aspects of the local control tradition in order to articulate local values, engage communities, and ensure equitable opportunities for all of Vermont’s students. These are laudable goals and reflect important values that resonate with many school communities in other states as well. At the same time that educators around the world are rethinking school design and leading transformation initiatives, Vermont is redefining its local school communities. As the state streamlines its overly complex governance structures to improve capacity and equity for all students, it has the opportunity to reinvent local school governance for the 21st Century.

**Implications for Further Research**

While several clear trends emerged from this research, the study also raised several questions. The size and scope of this study circumscribed its findings, but equally important is the fact that Vermont is still midstream in an extensive governance reform. Nevertheless, Act 46 has already had a significant impact, and merger discussions are reshaping Vermonters’ assumptions around local control. The VSA’s Jeff Francis took stock of the change underway, explaining:

I don’t think that most people could have predicted the amount of movement
associated with Act 46 that we’ve seen. Communities have, by in large, turned into the law rather than away from it. In places where the question of unification under Act 46 has been asked, about 90% of the communities have supported unification, and they’re doing it at a rate of about 70% in favor in those communities, which I think also speaks to the issue of local control.

With local districts finding their own way to governance reform, instead of top-down state redistricting, local communities are in the process of redefining themselves at the same time that they work towards clearer, more common sense governance structures. The implications raise important questions about public school, local governance, and the definition of community.

Ideas for further research sparked by these questions include, but are not limited to, the following lines of inquiry:

- From the perspective of gender, race, and class, how well do school boards represent the diversity of their communities?
- How, if at all, does school district unification change the work of school boards in relation to various stakeholders?
- How does public school choice influence the public’s perception of local control of schools?
- What new structures for community engagement and democratic participation are emerging, if any, with the disappearance of local district boards?
- What benefits, if any, are towns in unified districts seeing as defined by student outcomes and the school tax rate?
- When it comes to public education, is there such a thing as a Vermont Approach?
Final Thoughts

Local control remains a sacred cow in Vermont. For example, when the newly elected Vermont Governor Phil Scott tried to require school districts to level-fund their budgets—and proposed delaying Town Meeting Day to allow boards to rewrite them—the public outcry was immediate and overwhelming. After school boards and community members protested the unexpected statewide school finance decision, legislators prevented a delayed town meeting date, intended for boards to rewrite local budgets to meet the Governor’s demand for statewide level-funding (Danitz Pache, 2017, January 31; 2017, February 3). In the face of virulent opposition, Governor Scott adopted a new course of action and let his executive mandate recede from consideration. Even as Vermont streamlines its governance structures and voters adopt district mergers, it is clear that Vermonter will not be giving up their cherished local governance traditions any time soon.

When it comes to local control of schools in Vermont, the state government and local districts have been dancing a passionate tango for about 200 years. Intertwined, they press against each other, locked in a twisting embrace, against the steady, alternating rhythm of taxpayers clamoring for high-quality schools, and then for lower property taxes. The legislature passes a law, but locals push back, and the law is repealed or amended beyond recognition. A new commissioner proposes consolidating districts, and then is forced out of his position. Like tango dancers, the center of gravity swings back and forth between state and local governance entities, with long stretches of tensed immobility followed by dramatic dips, lunges, and flourishes. However, when calm
returns, we notice that things have changed. The dancers have adopted a new pose, and find themselves on the other side of the ballroom floor. In the same way, state and local control of schools seems to shift back and forth, but in the end, we find ourselves in a largely state-operated system as defined by teacher licensing, curriculum, and funding.

Perhaps another way to think of local control of schools in the state would be to think of Vermont’s rivers; they are Vermont’s love of education coursing through its mountains like so many arteries, ceaselessly carving, little by little, a new course, twisting their way through small towns and across valley floors, the erosion of local control, almost imperceptible, until a flash flood alters the river’s course dramatically for a few generations. Act 60 and Act 46 are these flash floods, bringing with them a markedly changed landscape and a new direction for Vermont schools, changing the way they are funded and governed for decades to come. Few Vermonters lack the common sense to get out of the brook when waters rise with the spring’s run-off from the surrounding ridges, and we can probably expect most Vermonters to take a common-sense approach to the governance changes just upstream from us. Still, what remains to be seen is the shape our cherished local governance traditions will take, once the floodwaters recede and calm returns, once again, to our brave little state.
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APPENDIX A

Interview Visual Prompts

1. Local Governance

2. State Role
3. Federal Role

4. State-Funded System

Share of School Funding in Vermont

5. Parental Role
APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

1. When I say "local control", what are the first words that come to mind?

2. Do you think Vermonter have a unique understanding of local control? If so, why? What does local control mean to you?

3. In your work, what aspects of local control of schools do you find to be most important and why? Where do you perceive you make the most difference at the local level?

4. In which of the following areas do you feel you have the least amount of control in your experience as a school board member?

5. Which of your school board activities would you say are truly local, and which are really responding to state and national requirements?

6. What do you think of the Common Core State Standards and Smarter Balanced Assessment?

7. According to a current estimate, there is a school board member for every 65 students in Vermont—what do you think of that statistic?

8. Based on your personal experience, what would be the advantages and disadvantages to increased consolidation of districts in Vermont?

9. How do you think increased parental choice options such as tuitioning outside the district, Act 129, home-schooling, online courses, and dual enrollment are impacting local control in Vermont schools?
10. How do you see the relationship between local control and parental control?

11. With the newly established Vermont Secretary of Education, the Secretary now reports directly to the Governor. How do you think this will impact local control?

12. How do you understand local control differently now than before you were a school board member?

13. Is there anything you’d like to add to describe how you see local control of schools in Vermont?
APPENDIX C

Act 46, Sec. 47 Report on Roles of Principals, Superintendents, School Boards, and Local Councils or Advisory Committees

Report on Act 46 of 2015

An act relating to making amendments to education funding, education spending, and education governance

Sec. 47 Principals and Superintendents Study and Proposal

REPORT Submitted to House and Senate Education Committees

November 2015

Submitted by Secretary of Education
Rebecca Holcombe

VERMONT AGENCY OF EDUCATION
Legislation

Act 46 of 2015 An act relating to making amendments to education funding, education spending, and education governance


Objective of Report

Sec. 47. PRINCIPALS AND SUPERINTENDENTS; STUDY AND PROPOSAL

On or before January 15, 2016, the Secretary of Education, in consultation with the Vermont Superintendents Association, the Vermont School Boards Association, and the Vermont Principals' Association, shall develop and present to the House and Senate Committees on Education a proposal to clarify the roles of superintendents as systems managers and principals as instructional leaders. The proposal shall also address superintendents’ and principals’ relative responsibilities of supervision and evaluation.

Context of the Report

Throughout the summer of 2015, Agency staff drafted language and communicated with leadership of the VSBA, VPA and VSA on possible recommendations for clarifying the roles and responsibilities of administrators within the structure of our education governance system here in Vermont.

It should be noted that due to the significant changes to governance structures contemplated in Act 46 of 2015, there is a need for the roles of school boards and supervisory union boards to also be examined, which is why that is reflected in some of the findings within this report.

The duties and responsibilities of administrators are spelled out in both Vermont Statute and State Board Rules.

Specifically, V.S.A. 16, §242 Duties of Superintendents; §243 Principals: Appointment, renewal and dismissal, §244 Duties of Principals. Additional roles and responsibilities are spelled out in State Board of Education Rule 2121.1 as part of the Education Quality Standards (rule series 2000) the Board is required to promulgate under V.S.A. §165.
Summary of Results
The Agency is making only one statutory change recommendation. Currently V.S.A. 16 §243 requires notice of non-renewal of principal’s contract at least 90 days before the existing contract expires (for a principal who has been continuously employed for more than two years in the same position). The education partners and Agency recommend “on or before February 1” be inserted in place of “at least 90 days before the existing contract expires.” Accelerating the notice of non-renewal of a principal’s contract to February 1 will provide both the principal and the school district an additional 60 days’ time to pursue options for the next school year. Presently, the 90-day window prior to contract expiration (on or about April 1) leaves little time for principals in this situation, and school districts, to engage a thorough search for another employment opportunity (for the departing principal) and a replacement principal (for the school district). This proposed change in law to earlier notice (no later than February 1) would help to ensure a fairer process for the departing principal, a better search process for the employer school district, and would solidify school leadership before offering contracts to teachers and support staff. Therefore, the recommendation is that V.S.A. 16 §243 be amended as follows:

“§ 243. Appointment; renewal; dismissal

... (c) Renewal and nonrenewal. A principal who has been continuously employed for more than two years in the same position has the right either to have his or her contract renewed, or to receive written notice of nonrenewal at least 90 days before the on or before February 1 of the year in which the existing contract expires.”

Additional Recommendations
The impetus for this report and subsequent examination is the need to clarify the roles and responsibilities of school board members and administrators and the chain of command therein. Because Vermont has 277 school districts within varying governance structures and multiple school boards within supervisory unions, the lines of responsibility, oversight and evaluation are not always adhered to as spelled out in the above references.

Therefore, the Agency and education partners have developed the following purpose statements for each role, and hope to use this report as an opportunity to reinforce existing rules and best practices.

Superintendents: Purpose
Operations: The Superintendent provides executive leadership for education and operations within the system and responsible for:
• Overall system leadership. Maintaining focus on the board’s vision, and leading a collaborative process system-wide to develop an education work plan to achieve the goals of that vision.
• Promoting and evaluating quality of education and equity of opportunities within the system.
• Supporting the board by working with the chair to ensure effective board operation that enables the board to evaluate implementation of their mission and progress towards their goals.
• Directing services, programs and resources, to ensure the quality of learning opportunities and efficient use of system resources.
• Assuring compliance with policies set by the school board, and state and federal statutes and regulations.
• Appointing all non-licensed staff.
• Recommending one candidate for Board approval for licensed staff positions.
• Using multiple sources of data to assess student progress toward proficiency-based graduation and to capture evidence of learning with respect to the Education Quality Standards.

The Superintendent is accountable to the board and to the state for operating within statute and regulations.

Superintendents: Sample Indicators of Success

• Decisions are made strategically on behalf of and in service of school board policies and mission.
• Superintendent engages in intentional leadership development within the system.
• Superintendent supports conversations about students and outcomes through SU level staff and building leaders.
• Faculty and staff can articulate mission/vision and focus on students, as well as what they are doing to advance learning and systems consistency across and within building(s).
• Both students and educators engaged in continuous learning.
• Leadership teams have clear expectations and accountability.
• Regular staff evaluations do take place, both at the administrative and building level.
• The District has a clear focus reflecting professionalism, shared leadership and a long-term plan for the future.

Principals: Purpose
Instructional Leadership: principals are responsible for:

• Serving as instructional leaders.
  o Managing and developing staff professional skills
Championing and supporting a shared vision of student success
- Cultivating a safe, supportive, and inclusive school climate that is conducive to learning.
- Directing day-to-day operations within the school.
- Contributing to the development of and ensuring the implementation of the continuous improvement action plan.
- Consistent with SU/SD evaluation systems, supervising and evaluating staff with an emphasis on improving teaching and learning.
- Coordinating resources, time, structures and roles effectively to promote and support student success using multiple sources of data.
- Providing clear and timely communications to community members and families regarding school progress and well-being.
- Developing building-specific procedures consistent with district-level policy and educational vision.

Principals are accountable to the Superintendent. Principals: Sample

Indicators of Success
- Consistency across the school with respect to instruction, use of data, and expectations.
- Intentional development of teacher leadership/leveraging of teaching expertise to improve instruction.
- Resources of the school system are managed cost-effectively.
- All educators receive timely, high quality feedback and support.
- Climate indicators suggest strong positive school climate, and where data suggests needs, principal directs improvement efforts related to those needs.
- Evidence of support for professional learning and collaboration, including use of meeting time for focus on improving teaching.
- Instructional staff members are provided regular evaluation.
- Principals invested in staying in their schools to engage in continuous improvement over time (resulting in low levels of turnover).

School Board in a Supervisory District: Purpose
Systems governance. The Board:
- Sets the mission and vision for the district.
- Uses the mission to guide decision-making.
- Sets performance goals for the district.
• Establishes local policies aligned across the Supervisory District consistent with the minimum standards established by the State Board of Education.
• Employs and supervises the Superintendent (sole direct employee of the Board).
• Holds the Superintendent accountable for developing a strategy and education work plan to achieve District or SU goals.
• Negotiates districtwide employment contracts.

School boards are accountable to voters, and subject to the laws and regulations of the state.

School Board Sample Indicators of Success
The Board:
• Approves and provides oversight of implementation of the district education plan and relevant performance indicators.
• Approves proposed budget and submit to voters.
• Monitors system performance against the budget.
• Reviews and updates policies on a routine basis to reflect changing statutory and regulatory context, and evolving system’s priorities.
• Determines capital project priorities.
• Reviews and provides feedback to Superintendent on an annual basis.
• Maintains a strong focus on outcomes and indicators of performance, as evidenced in meeting agendas and minutes.
• Approves school continuous improvement plans, and reviews regular performance reports as provided by Superintendent.
• Boards should set annual goals for themselves and all meetings should have an agenda built around those goals.

Teachers: Purpose
Instructional development and delivery: Teachers are responsible for:
• Maintaining a strong, safe and supportive classroom climate that is conducive to learning.
• Knowing expectations for student learning, and developing and implementing high-quality opportunities to learn that engage learners and move all students systematically towards ambitious goals.
• Maintain fidelity to supervisory union action plan, and make decisions with consideration for system goals.
• Use data to inform teaching and to make teaching responsive to individual needs (personalization); based upon what is best for students (as opposed to adults).

Teachers are accountable to the Principal.
Teachers: Sample Indicators of Success

- Student survey data indicates students feel teachers are invested in their safety and learning.
- Students indicate they feel challenged.
- Student outcomes suggest continuous improvement and progress towards goals.
- Teachers play a leadership role within schools and across schools, sharing expertise and providing mentoring in service of systems goals.
- Teachers engage in ongoing professional collaboration around improving teaching and learning, both within schools and across schools in the system, and within grade levels and across grade levels.
- Teachers are invested in staying in the school and working to make it strong.

Local councils or advisory committees: Purpose

Building based councils or teams operate in an advisory capacity to the principal. They:
- Provide advice to the principal regarding school policies.
- Suggest, develop and support strategies for partnerships within the community.
- Provide advice on ways to improve or maintain a positive climate within the school.
- Serve as liaisons between the community and the school.

Local councils or advisory committees: Sample Indicators of Success

- Parents and community members have structured opportunities to provide feedback to the principal on a range of issues, including school climate and improvement initiatives.
- Local council meets on a regular, scheduled basis with building leaders, as evident in minutes.
- There are strong partnerships between the school and the surrounding community.
- Community members attend school events.

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