

School Boards in America

Other Books by Gene I. Macroff

Building Blocks (2006)

A Classroom of One (2003)

The Learning Connection (2001), editor, with Patrick M. Callan and Michael D. Usdan

Imaging Education (1998), editor

Altered Destinies (1998)

Scholarship Assessed (1997), with Charles E. Glassick and Mary Taylor Huber

Team Building for School Change (1993)

Sources of Inspiration (1992), editor

The School Smart Parent (1989)

The Empowerment of Teachers (1988)

School and College (1983)

Don't Blame the Kids (1981)

The Guide to Suburban Public Schools (1975), with Leonard Buder

School Boards in America
A Flawed Exercise in Democracy

Gene I. Maeroff

palgrave
macmillan



SCHOOL BOARDS IN AMERICA

Copyright © Gene I. Maeroff, 2010.

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2010 978-0-230-10758-8

All rights reserved.

First published in 2010 by PALGRAVE MACMILLAN® in the United States—a division of St. Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Where this book is distributed in the UK, Europe, and the rest of the world, this is by Palgrave Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

Palgrave® and Macmillan® are registered trademarks in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and other countries.

ISBN 978-0-230-10931-5 ISBN 978-0-230-11749-5 (eBook)

DOI 10.1057/9780230117495

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Maeroff, Gene I.

School boards in America : a flawed exercise in democracy / Gene I. Maeroff.
p. cm.

1. School boards—United States. 2. School boards—Political aspects—United States.
3. Public schools—United States. 4. School board-superintendent relationships—
United States. 5. Education and state—United States. I. Title.

LB2831.M235 2010

379.1'5310973—dc22

2010019400

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Scribe Inc.

First edition: December 2010

Transferred to Digital Printing in 2011

To Joyce

My one and only

Contents

Preface	ix
1 A Cradle of Democracy	1
2 The School Board's Impact on Student Learning	13
3 Expenditures: Huge and Uneven	31
4 Jobs, Jobs, Jobs	47
5 A School Board's Key Employee: The Superintendent	65
6 Teachers: The Heart of the Enterprise	79
7 The Mirage of Local Control	95
8 The Special Burden of Special Education	109
9 The Inner Workings of School Boards	125
10 The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly in the Work of School Boards	137
11 Accepting Responsibility	151
12 Other Ways to Govern Schools	167
13 Do School Boards Have a Future?	187
Notes	201
Bibliography	213
Index	223

Preface

When I began the research and writing specific to this book in late 2007, I was on the cusp of declaring my candidacy for a seat on my local school board. I had already spent decades observing and analyzing educational developments and events around the country. In so doing, though, I had probably not given sufficient attention to the role of the board of education, an entity that is easy to overlook. The possibility of running for a position on a school board piqued my interest in doing this book, which seemed like a logical follow-up to other books I have written about many aspects of education.

My work on the book reinforced my conviction that people ought to know more about school boards. These bodies spend a lot of the public's money, provide millions of jobs, and most importantly, help shape the future for young Americans. Yet school boards remain out of sight, garnering attention primarily when the annual budget is set. My goal in this book, as in most of my previous ones, is to reach both education professionals and serious general readers.

I didn't enter this endeavor with a plethora of preconceived notions about school boards. Some critics would abolish them. Others would trim and narrow their responsibilities. Frankly, I'm not persuaded that elementary and secondary education would be that much better if school boards didn't exist.

This doesn't mean that school boards could not do a better job of governing the districts they serve, the legal function with which they are charged. Regardless of background, almost all members come to school boards as amateurs in school system governance. They learn on the job and suffer from the shortcomings that plague novices in most endeavors. I use the word "flawed" in the subtitle of this book advisedly. There are many built-in obstacles that thwart school boards.

My time on a school board was invaluable to my work on the book, which I offer neither as a memoir based on that experience nor as an exposé of the board on which I served. This is not a book about the Edison, New Jersey, board of education. However, I draw on my board experiences where applicable to help illustrate some of my points. Authors do this all the time. At no point, though, do I refer by name to any of my town's board

members, school employees, students, or anyone else associated with the Edison public schools. Nor have I violated any confidences.

I was in touch by phone, email, or in person with dozens of people throughout the country as I gathered and verified information. I quote these sources extensively, and I have crafted anecdotes and formed impressions based on what I learned. Virtually all the quotes in this book that are not accompanied by citations are ones that I personally obtained. I broadened the scope of the book through interviews with people in about two dozen states.

The subject of my focus is, indeed, the American institution of the school board. There are sufficient commonalities despite the differences to allow for such an investigation. It is therefore possible to make statements and offer observations that capture the ethos of school system governance almost wherever in the country that it occurs.

For me, already familiar with the world of education, service on a school board was unlike any other experience that I have had. It burdened me with legal and fiduciary responsibilities. It put limits on what I could say publicly about what I had learned. It thrust me—a person accustomed to interviewing others—into the role of interviewee for members of the media. It put extensive demands on my time without any remuneration whatsoever. It threw me into close and continuing contact with eight fellow board members, most of whom—most of the time—were generally cordial despite differences that arose. It exposed me to the world of politics and the infighting, gossiping, and maneuvering that unfortunately insinuate themselves into the work of what are supposedly nonpartisan positions on school boards.

Furthermore, when I was elected the board president in the spring of 2010, as I was nearing completion of this book, I got a new perspective on school board service. It was a challenging time, when millions of dollars had to be cut from our budget and an interim superintendent had to be found quickly to replace an acting superintendent who did not get hired as superintendent. It became clear that the expectations that the board president must meet and the pressures under which he may find himself far exceed what other members of the board face.

All in all, I was fortunate in winning election to the school board governing the fifth-largest district in the state, driven by both curiosity and a sense of volunteerism. I certainly did not take on this mission to write a book, but that was a happy outcome. It was a privilege to play some small role in trying to enhance the learning of my neighbors' children. The future of every student who attends a public school is at stake in the work of school boards, and there is perhaps no greater responsibility for which a man or woman can volunteer. It might sound corny, but it's true.

Gene I. Maeroff