Academic Research of
School Board **Conflict**

Identifying and addressing unproductive conflict on Wisconsin school boards

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I f you are a former or current school board member, I think it is safe to assume that you are no stranger to group conflict. Conflict is at the heart of the democratic governance process.

Once on the board, members debate, ask questions, vote, and then do it all over again. Wisconsin communities are diverse in their thinking and policy preferences, and logically our state's representative institutions follow suit.

Hence, a certain level of conflict on school boards is to be expected. It serves a purpose. Without conflict, a school board may become nothing more than a rubber stamp for administrators. Worse yet, a conflict-averse board may fail to consider good policy ideas for fear of rocking the boat. Worst of all is when a board falls into a state of group-think, in which members ignore the needs of the very people they were elected to serve.

On the other hand, too much conflict on a school board will grind substantive progress to a halt, lead to entrenched coalitions, and have a broadly negative impact on organizational performance.

Examining Board Conflict

In a recently published peer-reviewed article, Douglas Ihrke, professor of Public and Nonprofit Administration at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and I explore the sources of negative group conflict on Wisconsin school boards. The article, which appeared in *Public Policy and Administration*, builds on previous studies of small group dynamics that, in general, have shown a negative relationship between conflict and governing performance on public and nonprofit boards. In the article, we define conflict as unproductive board member disagreements, *i.e.,* disagreements over issues unrelated to the core task of governing a school district.

One of the reasons we wanted to look at this topic is the oft-repeated assumption that school boards are politicized to the point of negatively impacting student performance. Our suspicion, which proved correct, is that there is actually large variation in the levels of group conflict on individual Wisconsin school boards. Boards are complex, and it is impossible to understand their impacts based on a few anecdotes of boards captured by special interest groups.

In late 2013 and early 2014, Dr. Ihrke and I surveyed Wisconsin school board members from across the state in order to test several hypotheses on the causes of negative school board conflict. We had a response rate of more than 23 percent. We measured conflict by asking board members their level of agreement with the following statements:

- Conflict among some school board members is high.

- Disagreements between board members often become personalized.

- During board negotiations, prior conflicts often resurface.

- School board coalitions (two or more individual members joining forces) tend to form along predictable lines (*e.g.,* political party, male/female, etc.)

The statements, all used in previous studies of municipal governance, get at four negative conflict types. The first is perceptions of high general conflict, generically defined. The second is relationship conflict, which is personal animosity between board members. The third is entrenched conflict, which is when board members are unable to move on from past disagreements. The last is coalition conflict, where board members disagree on their policy preferences for reasons unrelated to a substantive governing issue, such as ideology.

Findings

After surveying Wisconsin school board members, we came to some interesting findings for our hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: School boards overseeing lower performing school systems are more prone to conflict.

We found no evidence to support this. After controlling for student, district, and board member demographics (which we did in all of our models), there was no link between a district's overall DPI report card score and board conflict.

The absence of a relationship was surprising to us and a clear indication that the nature of the conflict–performance relationship needs further examination in future research. It is possible, and somewhat supported in our findings, that the district racial and socioeconomic variables commonly found to predict academic performance in school districts are the focus of board debates and conflicts. In other words, boards may conflict over the root cause of low district academic performance rather than the low performance itself.

Hypothesis 2: Stability, as indicated by low levels of board turnover, lowers perceived conflict levels.

We suspected that stable boards, *i.e.,* those with very little turnover in the previous five years, would have lower levels of board conflict. We were wrong. We found no relationship between stability and conflict.

This finding is perhaps an indicator that a high degree of board stability can be a double-edged sword. Whilst, it may allow for the establishment of norms, but it may also enable the formation of predictable coalitions. Interestingly, there is a significant relationship between board members having three or more years of experience and lower levels of perceived total conflict and personalized disagreements. So while overall board stability is not necessarily a net positive or negative, having a board consisting of more experienced members is likely to have a positive influence on board relations.

Hypothesis 3: Positive board member-superintendent relations are an indicator of low conflict.

Here we were correct. Board members who viewed their superintendent as a governing partner have significantly lower levels of conflict than those who did not.

Hypothesis 4: Ideological diversity increases conflict on school boards.

If school boards are overly politicized, one would expect ideologically diverse boards to have higher levels of conflict. We found no evidence of this. The presence of shared political beliefs among board members serving together did not lower conflict.

Hypothesis 5: Boards overseeing more challenging student populations exhibit higher levels of perceived conflict.

Our hypothesis that boards overseeing more challenging student populations exhibit higher levels of perceived conflict, is supported with a significant caveat. Overall, there is a statistically significant relationship between the percentage of minority students served by a school district and negative conflict types: The higher the percentage of minority pupils, the higher the perceived level of board conflict. However, boards overseeing districts with higher percentages of special needs pupils actually exhibit lower levels of conflict. These findings beg the question; why would one set of students increase conflict while another decrease conflict?

We believe the answer has to do with the existence of clearly outlined federal laws and procedures for special needs students in American states. Under federal law, pupils suspected of having special needs are evaluated, and, if the existence of special needs is confirmed, given an Individual Education Plan (IEP) in consultation with their parents and teachers. In contrast, no clear set of policies from the state or federal government dictates how school boards are to deal with problems of racial achievement gaps in schools. There is clear disagreement among policy makers on how best to deal with low minority achievement in

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Wisconsin (and elsewhere), making this a likely area for school board members to conflict.

Conclusions

Looking back on our findings, our overall conclusion is that the best course of action for Wisconsin school boards looking to lower levels of board conflict is to make efforts to improve board-superintendent relations.

Taking proactive steps, including formal board development and strategic planning exercises, can mitigate unproductive conflict.

Future research should focus on whether our findings hold true in other states, particularly those with structural and demographic differences with Wisconsin.

In addition, a greater understanding of the relationship between small group dynamics on school boards and measurable academic performance can be obtained by further questioning the relationship (or absence of) between conflict and performance. Does conflict impact performance rather than the other way around? Do school boards focus on the root causes of poor performance rather than the performance itself? Are key measures of academic performance missing something?

Answering these questions will further strengthen the findings presented here, and further the ability of public organizations to take informed steps to improve their governance behaviors. ∎

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