

## What Does the Public Really Want?

*Board members must separate fact from fiction when trying to figure out the real expectations their community has for the school district and from public education as a whole*

**W**ant to make voters happy? It's easy. Just do the following:

- Reduce spending and avoid lay-offs.

- Ensure that all students pass state tests and avoid teaching to those tests.

- Preserve music, art, libraries, and physical education and cut anything in the budget not related to reading and math tests.

- Fully fund extracurricular activities and don't inconvenience parents or students with fundraising responsibilities.

- Meet federal requirements for special education and reduce the disproportionate amount of your budget that you allocate to special education.

If you can do all of that and control your temper while someone bashes public education during your next encounter at the grocery store, then you are qualified to be a school board member.

In a democracy, people are entitled to their opinions. They are not, however, entitled to their own facts. Here are some practical guidelines for board members in evaluating competing claims for what the public really wants from our educational system.

### Volume vs. "volume"

First, volume (quantity of sound) is not always the same as volume (quantity of



people). In several school districts I have studied, I found articulate and vocal groups opposed to a number of instructional initiatives, ranging from professional learning communities to improvements in student writing.

Letters to the editor, griping to school board members, and, of course, comments in public meetings made these complaints seem like a tsunami of opposition that would overwhelm even the most well-intended initiative. But when I evaluated the confidential and anonymous responses to surveys of more than 6,000 teachers in these districts, I learned that 17 percent enthusiastically supported the initiatives, 53 percent were willing to model the instructional strategies in their classrooms, and 28 percent took a wait-and-see approach, wishing to evaluate more evidence before coming to a conclusion.

What did that leave in strident oppo-

sition? Two percent. The dissenters were certainly entitled to their views, but any representation that they were a majority, or even a significant minority, simply did not square with the facts.

The next time you hear that "parents are unhappy" or "teachers are angry," it might be wise to inquire, "How many people do those comments represent?" Is it volume or "volume"?

### My school is great, yours isn't

Second, contrast the general with the personal when evaluating public opinion about education. A staple of political wisdom is that pundits since Benjamin Franklin have criticized members of Congress in general, but most people think that their own representative is just fine.

Despite a recurring theme in the press that the public is ready to "throw the bums out," our Congress continues to have somewhat lower turnover than did the Politburo in the former Soviet Union. Similarly, the annual poll conducted by Gallup and Phi Delta Kappa ([www.pdkintl.org](http://www.pdkintl.org)) regularly concludes that respondents' evaluation of their own public education system is significantly higher than their views of public education in general.

Recent survey data from Public Agenda ([www.publicagenda.org](http://www.publicagenda.org)), based on a sample of more than 1,400 people nationwide, suggests that more than half of parents believe math and science education is "fine as it is," while public comment since the dawn of Sputnik would suggest that the vast majority of Americans take an apocalyptic view of the state of math and science education. We are losing to—take your pick—the Russians (1950),

Japanese (1980), and Chinese (2010).

I, too, despair of the deteriorating state of math and science education, along with the alarming demise of sophisticated writing by American students. But, as the Public Agenda and Kappan research reminds me, I must take care before I transform my national pessimism into local criticism.

### **Effectiveness vs. popularity**

Some of the most important decisions you make are among the least popular. In previous decades, courageous board members cast difficult and unpopular votes in the pursuit of the greater good on topics ranging from racial justice to banning smoking to prohibiting corporal punishment.

In hindsight, these decisions seem clear, but many board members who

made them lost friends, supporters, and elections. Service on a school board means leading public opinion, not merely following it. Today, some boards are deciding to raise performance requirements for students, teachers, and administrators in moves that are unpopular but essential. Some policymakers are following the best available evidence and improving policies on retention, grading, and academic honors, three hot topics I will address in the months ahead. But the evidence is irrelevant in an environment driven by feelings.

Statements such as “retention does not work,” “giving students zeroes for missing work is inaccurate and counterproductive,” or “the difference between the valedictorian and salutatorian is statistical fiction” are kerosene

on the flames of public opinion. But the ultimate question is not the popularity of these statements, but their truth.

Ultimately, school board members represent more than the people who make comments at meetings, write critical letters to the editor, and buttonhole them at the grocery store. They represent students who don't have a political action committee and who do not vote, but whose future depends upon the wisdom and courage of their leaders. ■

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Douglas B. Reeves (dreeves@leadandlearn.com) is an author and founder of The Leadership and Learning Center, which provides professional development services, research, and solutions for educators and school leaders who serve students from prekindergarten through college.