THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL: SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS’ MOTIVATION FOR SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

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ABSTRACT

THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL: SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS’ MOTIVATION FOR SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

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Northern Illinois University, 2024
Patrick Roberts, Director

Understanding the motivation behind school board members' governance is crucial for ensuring the effectiveness of public schools. This research aims to analyze the motivations of five newly elected board members and compare them with past research on governance and motivation. The leadership qualities of school superintendents also impact governance and can influence board members' motivations for running and serving their communities. Similarly, board members' motivations can affect how superintendents lead their districts and prioritize different topics.

The research is divided into three papers. Paper 1 reviews existing literature and is organized into three distinct sections that explore school board governance, the board/superintendent relationship, and motivation for public service. Paper 2 presents the results of a qualitative study, analyzing and interpreting the responses of five newly elected school board members from different public school unit districts. Finally, Paper 3 synthesizes the information gathered from Papers 1 and 2 to develop a professional development tool for organizations, board presidents, presenters, and superintendents to use to better understand members' motivations.
THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL: SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS’ MOTIVATION FOR SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

BY

ANDREW LOBDELL
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A DISSERTATION OF PRACTICE SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF LEADERSHIP, EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY AND FOUNDATIONS

Doctoral Director:
Patrick Roberts
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I would like to express my gratitude to my colleagues, teachers, professors, and family members for their unwavering support and encouragement throughout my journey. Most importantly, I owe my success to my parents, Murry and Julie Lobdell, who provided me with the moral foundation and direction that helped me reach this point in my life. When they decided for me to continue my post-secondary education, I was unsure about the future, but their guidance and support made all the difference.

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DEDICATION

To my wife, Amy, and our three girls: Aubrey, Avery, and Adrienne
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INTRODUCTION

In recent years school board meetings have been contentious (Mulvihill & Schultz, 2023; Williams, 2022). A quick look at the news and one would wonder why any individual would be motivated to run for school board (Borter et al., 2022; Laats, 2021; Talbot, 2021). Board decisions have traditionally been local; however, the pandemic, various news sources, and the use of social media platforms have allowed people from across the country to become involved in national controversies at the local policy level. The pandemic forced schools to instruct students remotely and consequently propelled parents to become more involved and outspoken in their student’s education. Overall, the pandemic brought a newfound appreciation for educators by allowing parents easier access to the classroom and the opportunity to experience their child’s classroom during remote learning.

This access did not come without surprises, however. Access to teachers’ classrooms and curriculums during the pandemic evolved into a range of hot-button issues for board members: masks, vaccines, policies for trans-athletes, critical race theory, transgender policies, questions about equity, and what content should be taught in health class are topics that community members have brought forward to local boards. With these hot-button issues in the news, motivations for even the most altruistic school board members appeared to be in disarray.

My background is presented so that the reader will better understand my motivation and experiences that contributed to the research. My interest in this topic has evolved over the past decade from my experience as a junior high principal and other roles that I have had as a board
member myself. The tipping point for this specific topic evolved from classes that I took throughout my doctoral work at Northern Illinois University and my professional life experiences during the 2020 health crisis. I have become more involved in politics and elections in the past several years; however, this has always been a part of my family.

My father has served as a township trustee for many years and is involved in a local cemetery board. My mother’s first cousin is currently an elected member of the Illinois House of Representatives. My family has been involved in and followed politics in different ways over the years. Several years ago, I was appointed as the supervisor of my township, making me a local township official. I officially had my name appear on a ballot during the last election, which was a unique democratic experience.

Growing up on a dairy farm, politics has always affected my family in some way. I can remember comments from family and friends about how policies affected the price of milk, corn, and other commodities, the amount of taxes the family farm would have to pay at the end of the year, or about certain government incentives or programs that were available, which were often dependent on who was elected to office. Even closer to home, the elected township road commissioner was always a topic of conversation and had a major influence on what type of care our rural gravel road would receive. The care of the roads and how the roads were maintained often changed from one election cycle to the next. Motivations of road commissioners are and have always been a widely discussed topic among local farmers and rural residents with residents asking why and when questions often.

The comparisons between hearing township residents debate how they would manage the roads versus how they were being managed and school board member discussions on how they would manage certain aspects of a school are very similar from my perspective. The more I have
listened to these types of conversations over the years the more they seem to be the same and contain similar qualities. Because of my personal and professional experiences and the knowledge I have gained from my doctoral program, I was motivated to research and learn more about these motivations.

Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation consists of three papers. The first paper presents a review of the research literature around the characteristics of effective school boards, public service motivation, leadership styles, and school board members’ motives and power. My literature review also explores how effective governance might be influenced by the relationship between the superintendent and board, and the roles motivation plays in effective school boards.

In my second paper, I present the results of an empirical study I conducted that explored the following research questions:

1. Are the reasons people run for the school board primarily personal, altruistic, or other?
2. How do the motivations of school board members align with research on effective governance and motivation?
3. How do school board members perceive the superintendent/board relationship, and how do those perceptions align with their motivations?

The research involved collecting data through interviews with five school board members from five different school districts that were geographically diverse (rural, urban, and suburban).

My third paper builds on the findings of Paper 2. A tool that I call Board Circles was created in Paper 3 as a product of my research. Information from my study will be used to further
superintendent and board member training and emphasize the importance of board members’ roles and motivations in determining effective school governance.

**Purpose, Significance, and Intended Audience**

Healthy relationships between superintendents and school board members are essential for effective governance. Understanding the motivations of school board members to run and serve on their local school boards is key to developing good relationships with them. The purpose of this study is to identify the current motivations of school board members and how they may have changed since 2020. Motivation is the force behind human behavior and is the foundation of all board operations, which is why it's important to understand what motivates members to run and serve. This understanding is especially crucial for superintendents during times of highly politicized environments and when membership changes. Effective and organized school boards lead to the best functioning of schools. However, during detrimental environments, board motivations can be compromised, leading to counterproductivity and ineffectiveness in achieving their mission and goals.

It is important to examine whether school boards have become more or less altruistic over time and what the implications of these changes may be for local school districts. To understand the character and qualities of a school board, we need to first understand the motivations of its members. These motivations may be altruistic, aimed at serving the community, or personal, serving their interests. The motivations of board members are a critical factor in determining which issues they are most passionate about during their tenure, the type of relationships they may have with the superintendent and other members, and how they may vote on items. Ultimately, the students are the ones who are affected by the motivations of the board members.
Students’ achievements are often the gauge for the success of a district. School districts are more likely to be successful if they follow the research of Carver’s (1990) policy governance model, Rice et al.’s (2001) findings from the Lighthouse Inquiry regarding student achievement, Illinois Association of School Board’s (IASB) *Foundational Principles of Effective Governance* (2017), and Dervarics & O’Brien’s (2019) research on effective school board governance. Superintendents and board members must keep in mind the various studies when considering the motivations of board members who run and serve on school boards. By examining the motivations of board members, superintendents will be able to better understand the decision-making behaviors that board members exhibit. Understanding the motivations of board members allows superintendents to balance the needs and motivations of the community with those of the board and district in a democratic way. This can be achieved by applying the research mentioned in the studies.

Democracy thrives when every voice is heard, but it faces challenges even when it seems strong and protected. Some of the recent events that have put the foundations of democracy to the test include the September 11th attacks, the financial crisis of 2008, school shootings, and the health crisis of 2020. It can be argued that the response to these events failed to establish effective policies to meet the basic expectations of the voters for a functioning democracy. The democratic nature of school boards could be viewed as a microcosm of a democratic society (Peirce, 2020). Schools not only provide education but also offer access to social services and meals for children.

Effective boards listen to and respect the community's views, even during disagreements. Sant (2019) framed democratic education from three different approaches: education for democracy, education within democracy, and education through democracy. In the first
approach, education for democracy, education is viewed as a means of social reproduction, using education as a tool to improve future societies. This approach includes policies related to mass schooling. The second approach, education within democracy, prioritizes neoliberal or elite discourses, or individual demands. The third approach, education through democracy, sees education and democracy as independent of each other and aims to foster equality, inclusion, and participation from diverse backgrounds and discourses. Given the cyclical nature of democracy, what tools should a superintendent and board member have in their toolbox to make decisions that benefit their districts and society as a whole?

The data presented is intended for researchers, superintendents, and school boards. Its primary focus is to provide insight to superintendents and school board members on the motivations of board members and how such motivations can impact school districts. The ultimate goal is to improve school district governance and benefit public school communities. Researchers interested in topics like motivation and school district governance can also benefit from this data.

Positionality of Researcher

I work as a middle school principal in a small rural unit school district located in northwest Illinois. I have been in the education field for 20 years and have been serving as a principal for the past 15 years. Our school serves students in grades six through eight, while our unit district serves PK-12th grade students. The elementary and junior high buildings are connected, and the high school is situated across the street from the primary school. As a principal, I support general education teachers, instructional specialists, and non-certified staff members. My traditional role includes evaluation responsibilities, curriculum decisions,
scheduling, and human resources. Additionally, I am involved in technology and district-level strategic planning decisions on a case-by-case basis. However, the board of education makes the final decisions after reviewing the recommendations made by the superintendent.

I also currently serve on two boards outside of the school district where I am employed. The first board is for the Illinois Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ILASCD), which is the state affiliate of the national organization. ASCD is a professional development service that lets educators chart their learning journey as educators and as leaders so they and their students can flourish. I currently serve on the board of directors and co-chair the Membership and Partnership focus group of Illinois ASCD. I am in my tenth year serving in this role. As a board member, I am involved in board meetings, making decisions for the organization as a member of the board, and voting on items involving the direction of the organization and its employees. This role is an appointed unpaid position.

The second board that I serve on is that of my local township. I was first appointed to the role of township supervisor and then elected as a township official in the past election by the voters. As an elected township official, I am paid per state statute and township policies. As a township supervisor, I am also the township treasurer and bookkeeper. In this role, I am responsible for creating a budget, levying taxes, paying township and road district bills, creating and reviewing policy, and reporting financial information to the township board. This position is very similar to the position of a superintendent. Our township board is composed of four township trustees, one board secretary, one supervisor, and a road district commissioner. In our township, four trustees and the supervisor are voting members of the board.
As an employee of a school district that is controlled by a board and because I’m currently serving on two other boards, I often wonder about board members’ motivation for service as I reflect on my motivation for service on the boards that I serve on.
This paper is organized into several sections that examine the literature on effective and ineffective school board governance, superintendent/board relationships, and what motivates school board members to run and serve on their local school boards. The goal of this paper is to have a general understanding of motivation, review the research regarding school board members’ motivations, and better understand how board members’ motivations influence school leadership and governance. The literature specifically involving school board members’ motivations is limited. Due to limited research on this topic and in an attempt to better understand board members’ motivations, topics involving governance, leadership, relationships, trust, and public service motivation theory were researched to better understand and help answer questions concerning school board member motivations.

Many school board members’ motivations have shifted in the wake of the pandemic giving rise to new motivations and challenges for board members (Malkus et al., 2020). Due to the health crisis of 2020 and other controversial topics, school board discussions have focused much of their attention on health, science, and politics (Hartney & Finger, 2022; Kretchmar & Brewer, 2022; Roegman et al., 2022; Strauss, 2022) and have caused school boards to become unstable and less effective, which impacted their ability to reopen their schools during the pandemic (Varela & Fedynich, 2020).
There are some key studies analyzing data about the democratic nature of school boards as it relates to student achievement (Alsbury, 2008; Delagardelle, 2008; Plough, 2014; Resnick & Bryant, 2010), board/superintendent relationships (Honingh et al., 2020; Tekniepe, 2015), and the motivations of local school board members (Mountford, 2004). Healthy relationships between superintendents and school board members are essential for effective governance (Alsbury, 2023). The key to developing good relationships with school board members is understanding school board members’ motivations. The first step in effective governance and satisfying student achievement goals for superintendents is understanding what motivates board members and what motivates board members to serve on their local school board. Because motivation is responsible for the direction and magnitude of human behavior (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021), it is important to develop a good sense of what activates and motivates members to run and serve.

In today’s politicized climate, superintendents are expected to navigate and organize districts and collaborate with school board members with a level of governance that has been more specialized compared to pre-pandemic school board governance practices (Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). Dervarics and O’Brien (2019) have shown that districts with positive attitudes, knowledge, and approaches are more effective than their counterparts in lower-achieving districts. School board members must be transparent, and their motivations must be understood by the superintendent, as well as the other members of the school board, for effective governance to be achieved.
School Board Governance

School boards have been part of America for more than two centuries and are a link between the community and the schools they serve. The function of a school board is to represent the communities’ aspirations while providing local governing control of the school (IASB, 2017). In 2022, nearly 2 million public school children relied on the governance of their schools’ board of education. In Illinois, school boards are entities charged by law to govern. Nearly 6,000 school board members work toward the mission and goals of nearly 850 school districts. Many board members serve multiple terms; however, nearly 1200 new members are elected or appointed every election cycle (IASB, 2022). The requirements to become a school board member in Illinois include being a United States citizen and a resident of Illinois for one year preceding the election, being 18 years of age or older, being a registered voter, and not being an employee of the school you represent (IASB, 2022, p. 2).

In 1965, congress passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). ESEA was a significant piece of legislation that would lay the groundwork for how schools would operate for several years to come. In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) increased accountability requirements (Plotts & Gutmore, 2014) and prompted organizations such as the National School Boards Association (NSBA) and the IASB to publish works and systematic processes to help superintendents with the governance of school boards. Dee et al. (2013) found that NCLB influenced school policy and classroom practices, shifting districts’ focus on educational quality or academic achievement and causing school boards to become more accountable for reading and math achievement scores. Ford and Ihrke (2015) found that having board majority agreement on a definition of accountability related to academic outcomes
positively affected student performance indicators; however, the influence of demographic variables was far more impactful on achievement than having a unified board definition of achievement (p. 215).

Several negative effects also emerged because of NCLB, such as district-level increases in spending and reallocating time away from science and social studies as well as changes to school culture promoting a greater focus on attendance, punctuality, and student interest (Dee et al., 2013, p. 275). Discrepancies and inequities from district to district began to emerge, which influenced the governance of school boards and the way schools operated, arguably changing students’ experiences in schools and shifting the responsibilities of board members (Mathis & Trujillo, 2016; Plough, 2014, p. 49). Even with the increase in state and federal mandates regarding school performance and academic achievement legislated by federal and state policy, communities continue to elect board members based on character, personality, and social ties to the community (Garn & Copeland, 2014). Garn and Copeland (2014) state that “teacher contracts, funding of athletic or music programs, and emphasizing gifted education are examples of outcomes that might result when active citizens are disproportionately important to the outcome of elections” (p. 25).

Unlike the federal mandates placed on states by NCLB, the most recent federal education policy, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), shifted educational authority back to the states and allowed states to hold schools accountable by using annual assessments and evidenced-based interventions that encouraged school improvement (Thomas & Brady, 2005). Although ESSA was a well-received change from NCLB, it continues to be criticized for not being equitable and continues to be a system of accountability that includes federal mandates and interventions for low-performing schools (Mathis & Trujillo, 2016). Under ESSA, schools and school boards must
now consider not only student achievement but also nonacademic indicators to determine school effectiveness. Tekniepe’s (2015) research explains the challenges that superintendents face in this rapidly changing political, social, and economic landscape and how those challenges cause superintendent turnover. In addition to past federal, state, and local accountability measures, social and political provocations also present a new array of challenges and occupational pressures to the board-superintendent relationship (Kretchmar & Brewer, 2022; Roegman et al., 2022; Strauss, 2022) as well as school governance.

The concept of governance has been defined by the International Bureau of Education (2022) and in literature to refer to structures and processes that are designed to ensure accountability (Ford & Ihrke, 2015), transparency (Androniceanu, 2021; Mabillard & Pasquier, 2016), responsiveness and rule of law (Prowse et al., 2020), equity and inclusiveness (Niyibiz et al., 2021), and empowerment (Hoxha, 2015). School board governance also helps school districts promote group norms and values through a public forum. Marx and Davis (2012) concluded that “each nonprofit agency needs to clarify on a regular and consistent basis the ways governance is to be shared between the board and chief executive” (p. 49). Governance is often mistaken for management, which gives people the authority to produce results. Management allows school administration authority to distribute resources and carry out tasks within a set of parameters (Shaturaev & Bekimbetova, 2021); whereas, governance sets the parameters under which school administration will operate (Texas, 2019). Managing boards often focus on small details, which include how individuals carry out departmental processes or individual outcomes. Governing boards often focus on effective collaboration and the organization’s overall health, structure, direction, and results (Curry et al., 2018).
Attributes of Effective Boards

School boards often confuse governance with management. When school boards become managers rather than governors of school districts, schools become less effective (Wargo et al., 2022a). IASB’s (2017) *Foundational Principles of Effective Governance* includes six fundamental duties for school boards: 1) clarify the district’s purpose, 2) connect with the community, 3) employ the superintendent, 4) monitor performance, 5) delegate authority, and 6) and take responsibility for themselves (p. 3).

To determine whether a board is effective or ineffective, one must determine what it means to be effective. Land (2002) concluded that the literature on school boards had limitations because “reliable and valid measures to assess school boards have not been developed” (p. 271). Land also called for research that identified key characteristics of effective school board governance. Since Land, there has been an increase in the focus and amount of research related to school board effectiveness. Dervarics and O’Brien (2019) used pertinent studies from meta-analyses and case studies and found that effective school boards have eight essential characteristics:

1. Effective school boards commit to a vision of high expectations for student achievement and quality instruction and define clear goals toward that vision.

2. Effective school boards have strong shared beliefs and values about what is possible for students and their ability to learn, and of the system and its ability to teach all children at high levels.

3. Effective school boards are accountability-driven, spending less time on operational issues and more time focused on policies to improve student achievement.

4. Effective school boards have a collaborative relationship with staff and the community and establish a strong communications structure to inform and engage both internal and external stakeholders in setting and achieving district goals.
5. Effective boards are data savvy; they embrace and monitor data, even when the information is negative, and use it to drive continuous improvement.

6. Effective school boards align and sustain resources, such as professional development, to meet district goals.

7. Effective school boards lead as a united team with the superintendent, each from their respective roles, with strong collaboration and mutual trust.

8. Effective school boards take part in team development and training, sometimes with their superintendents, to build shared knowledge, values, and commitments for their improvement efforts. (p. 3)

Anderson and Young (2018) defined district effectiveness as the “presence of practices that promote the ability of a district to achieve the mission of delivering high quality and equitable educational experiences for each student” (p. 2). The researchers organized their practices into three domains: 1) focusing on supporting and leading people who work in schools and districts, 2) structuring and managing the organization and its resources, and 3) developing and delivering high-quality education (p. 2). Anderson and Young did find some commonly agreed-upon practices associated with effective schools, but they also argued that their findings were insufficient due to a lack of representation from schools across the United States. Anderson and Young also noted that further studies should not only focus on the research base for answers but that boards should seek guidance that is appropriate for their district.

Absent in this research was the importance of school board members’ motivations for running and serving on a school board. Many times, members’ motivation to run and serve on school boards include personal agendas based on negative personal experiences involving athletic programs, poor experiences with ineffective employees, political policy differences, student discipline issues, or the need for prestige and power (Lee & Eadens, 2014; Mountford, 2004). Curry et al. (2018) emphasized the level of a board member’s commitment to the
organization and noted that as new board members enter the board as “single-issue board members” or “managerial members,” existing members must not forget the benefits of Carver’s (1990) policy governance model. Carver’s theory of policy governance emphasized a clear division of roles and responsibilities between board members and employees but also faced criticism for board members not following the policy governance model when schools were in times of crisis.

Masli et al. (2018) developed an analytical business model to determine board effectiveness. They concluded that a board of directors is “most effective if and only if the board exhibits high levels of independence, competency, activity, and behavioral traits” (p. 513). Masli et al. also proposed that for a board to be even more effective, a “safeguard” mechanism should be put in place to control the behavior of board members and encouraged future research regarding the safeguard construct.

Research on public service motivation (Perry & Wise, 1990) has often referenced prosocial behaviors and altruism (Perry & Hondeghem, 2008; Piatak & Holt, 2020) as motivation for public service, motivation of school board members, and school board effectiveness (Alsbury, 2008; Delagardelle, 2008; Mountford, 2004). If school boards are to be effective, school board members must exhibit altruistic behavior characteristics and positive stable levels of public service motivations. I would argue that the cornerstone of effective governance for each district first falls within board members’ motivations and is not as contextual as a one-size-fits-all system.
Attributes of Ineffective Boards

In an extensive review of school board meetings, Lee and Eadens (2014) found that boards in low-performing districts were less orderly, spent less time on issues related to student achievement, did not listen respectfully to each other, did not rely on the superintendent for advice, and were focused on personal agendas rather than the policies of the district. Lee and Eadens’s research concluded that more school board members from low-performing districts needed training to improve their effectiveness.

Sampson and Bertrand (2022) argued that a suburban school board represented whiteness by aligning with white families rather than with black families, and that they lacked equity-oriented policies and prevented equitable deliberation at school board meetings due to governing rules instituted by governing boards that were not fully representative of the community it was serving. Black community advocates argued that the board meetings’ written and unwritten rules provided board members with tools to protect and maintain whiteness as property by instituting a three-minute speaking rule, not allowing extended public comment of members from minoritized communities within the district. They acknowledged in their study that boards often choose to maintain board rules that cause the community’s voice to be limited, when in fact meeting rules should be changed to allow for an enhanced equitable voice, especially in minority communities. Sampson and Bertrand concluded that when school board meetings are inherently racialized in ways that prevent equitable deliberation, board effectiveness suffers.
Unreliable Evidence on Board Effectiveness

The literature is somewhat confusing when considering student achievement and governing boards’ effectiveness. Plotts and Gutmore’s (2014) results suggested that experienced superintendents had a positive influence on student achievement in their study. Since school boards and superintendents are in a sense one governing body, one may be able to conclude that boards that are effective in raising student achievement are effective. Hess and Meek (2010) established that school board members had the potential and were ready and willing to increase student achievement, and Eadens et al.’s (2016, 2020) research shows that board training does increase student achievement. As mentioned previously, student achievement is often not the only characteristic that determines effectiveness.

Honingh et al. (2020) found a disconnect between school boards and educational quality. Honingh et al. asked what school boards could do to contribute to educational quality or student achievement and concluded that “ambitions for school boards and the expectations upon them are not evidence-based” (p. 168). Student learning and effective governance are often defined as being equivalent to academic achievement, school performance, and educational quality; however, Honingh et al.’s results reconfirm that research on school board effectiveness frequently relies on unreliable or anecdotal evidence. Honingh et al. also acknowledged a lack of empirical data linking school board effectiveness to educational quality or academic achievement and that “the relation between boards and educational quality is small” (p. 168).
Superintendent/Board Relationship

School board roles and responsibilities have changed over the past two centuries, but in many ways, they have remained the same (Kowalski, 2005). Collins (2021) argued that school boards are an important part of American democracy and found that “Americans as a whole want school boards who listen and engage with parents and stakeholders to be in charge of local public schools” (p. 353). Superintendents are central in governing effective schools and they occupy one of the most complex and demanding positions in American schools (Chingos et al., 2014). School boards and communities expect superintendents to predict future trends, improve student achievement, keep students and staff safe, manage the district’s financial interests, and communicate the collective will of its stakeholders with the board (Davidson & Hughes, 2019). To achieve these tasks, superintendents need to use dimensions of transformational leadership (Hay, 2006) with board members and have tools available to be able to adapt to members’ unique needs and motivations to foster healthy relationships.

What do these good board-superintendent relationships look like and how do superintendents foster these relationships? Wargo et al. (2022b) found collaboration and board training in short 10-minute bite-sized increments at the beginning of each board meeting were beneficial. This approach proved to be very effective in reminding the board members to “stay on the balcony and out of the weeds” (p. 65). Davidson et al. (2019) addressed factors perceived to be important in evaluations of superintendents by school boards. Superintendents were asked to rank the most important factors in their evaluation by board members. The top factors included management of the financial affairs of the district, maintaining the quality of the education program, relationships with employees, developing and implementing long-term plans
for the district, student performance measured by state-mandated assessments, and maintaining a safe environment for students (p. 225). Davidson et al.’s conclusions paralleled Hess and Meek’s (2010) research, which cited factors such as financial management, student achievement, and relationships as their highest priority.

**Superintendent/Board Trust**

In any board-superintendent relationship, there must be trust. Superintendents generally trust their boards (Bell, 2019; Davidson et al., 2019; Person et al., 2021) but also understand that power struggles can alter relationships and cause relationships to change and trust to fade (Tekniepe, 2015). Bridges et al. (2019) determined that superintendents must be “influencers” of good governance among both the board and the public. Bridges argued that to increase board effectiveness, public confidence, and expectations for effective democratic governance, superintendents must build trust with their boards through collaboration, board training, and transparency. Davidson and Hughes (2019) noted that trust between superintendents and boards was earned over many years and that trust “was less about the things that they did, and more about the way that they did them” (p. 66).

Considering trust in a more contemporary context, Devine et al. (2021) reviewed the literature on the coronavirus pandemic and considered the impact of political and social trust. Devine et al. noted that in the case of the pandemic, trust can be double-edged. Trust is often viewed as positive; however, with the pandemic, trusted actors encouraged noncompliance (Goldstein & Wiedemann, 2020), which caused negative consequences. In the case of school boards and superintendents, school boards that had not developed political and social trust with
their superintendent most likely had a negative experience with compliance and trust while serving during the recent pandemic.

Siegrist (2021) concludes in his research that the importance of trust varies by hazard and respondent group. Siegrist writes about the function of trust “being a mechanism for the reduction of complexity” (p. 481). Siegrist states that trust enables people to maintain their capacity and allows for a more complex environment. In the case of superintendent/board trust, trust is often associated with risk perception. When board members have difficulty understanding the complex nature of schools or making decisions regarding the safety and education of their children, trust is essential for board members to make decisions.

**Transformational Leadership**

Sivarat et al. (2021) described Bass’s (1985) transformational leadership as a process in which leaders transform the motivation of their followers to achieve a goal. Transformational leaders transform followers by developing a feeling of trust, loyalty, and respect. Superintendents who strive to be transformational leaders need to understand stakeholder motivations. Understanding school board motivations offers a pathway for the superintendent to establish trust, which is a necessary element of transformational leadership. When considering trust, Hoxha (2015) found that the strongest predictor of trust and empowerment in an organization was the transformational leadership style. Hoxha found that transformational leadership increases the level of trust and empowerment between employees as well as organizational effectiveness. Givens (2008) concluded that transformational leadership has a “direct influence on organizational citizenship behavior/performance, organizational culture, and organizational vision” (p. 15).
Development of the transformational leadership concept began with Burn’s (1978) work on transactional leadership followed by Bass’s (1985) work on transformational leadership. Bass theorized that transformational leaders strive to change the organizational culture by providing followers with inspiration through mission and goals. Four behavioral dimensions or sub-elements of Bass include individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence or charisma. Transformational leadership research (Sivarat et al., 2021) along with several meta-analyses (Hoch et al., 2018; Peng et al., 2021) has proven to positively predict a wide variety of performance outcomes for individuals, groups, and organizations that use a transformational leadership framework.

Avolio and Bass (1995) focused their attention on the “individualized consideration” frame of Bass’s (1985) work to determine how transformational leaders’ behaviors or messages were diffused into individuals, groups, and organizations over time. Avolio and Bass (1995) measured behaviors over time and found that “in time, this collection of individuals may begin to merge into a more structured group that shares certain beliefs, values, and expectations about how members should treat each other” (p. 212). The variables recognized in this frame include transformational leaders recognizing board members’ unique experiences, listening attentively, advising them, and coaching them as distinct individuals. In the case of school boards, superintendents who show empathy and support and act as mentors toward individual board members by listening to and addressing their concerns display individualized transformational leadership qualities. In addition, transformational superintendents who promote individualized considerations of self-development in board members’ motivations and ambitions are more likely to positively transform the will and aspirations of the board members compared to transformational leaders who offer support alone (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006). As individual board
members’ behaviors or motivations evolve, so does the cohesiveness of the group to accommodate the new norms and expectations of each member (Avolio & Bass, 1995 p. 212).

Another of Bass’s (1985) four elements includes inspirational motivation or how the leader motivates their followers. Leaders who display qualities from this frame articulate the mission and vision of the organization to the followers in an inspirational and motivational way to build confidence and the belief that the work to be done has a purpose (Sivarat et al., 2021). Webb (2007) studied how leaders’ behaviors influenced the motivations of employees. Webb found that leaders who demonstrate transformational qualities such as personal courage, confidence in others, and consideration for the strengths and abilities of others can boost the motivation levels of individuals. Peterson and Short (2002) researched community members perceptions and the understanding of the dynamics of the board president–superintendent relationship and the board decision making process. They found leaders who support inspirational motivation through precise, powerful, and engaging communication and allow members to believe in their abilities and their contributions are more likely to find success. Successful leadership in this area also helps to expose board members’ initial motivation for membership and encourages board members to transcend their interests for the sake of the district. Over time, the use of transformational leadership styles became part of the organizations’ culture (Avolio & Bass, 1995, p. 212) and in the case of school boards, embedded into the fabric of board members’ motivations and transforming their motivations and perceptions during their tenure. Transformational leaders who use inspirational motivation to give board members a strong sense of purpose and meaning are likely to succeed in driving the board collectively forward.
Finally, the charisma or “idealized influence” element of Bass’s (1985) theory advances the previous element’s significance concerning motivation. Leaders who are perceived as powerful, charismatic, and confident individuals by others (Aydogdu & Asikgil, 2011) have idealized influence. Transformational leaders create a common vision and mission for the organization by developing a sense of pride, admiration, and loyalty for the organization and community. Transformational leaders lead by example and build trust with the members of the organization and the organization itself by using their charisma, attitude, and morals to promote the organization’s mission and goals. Idealized influence in leadership includes high ethical standards of attitude and behavior to gain the trust of others.

How Motivations Impact School Board Effectiveness

Community members often have personal experiences that motivate them to run for their local school boards. Some school board members may be motivated to serve because of their experiences in school. Board member motivations may be easily understood by school superintendents or could be shrouded in mystery. Motivations can often be in the interest of the community and the students they serve, or motivations could serve a personal nature. There are many different theories and research regarding motivation; however, the research regarding the impact of school board members’ motivations on school board effectiveness is limited.

The Concept of Motivation

The interest in motivation has been around for a long time and has been a topic of exploration. The word motivation is derived from the Latin verb movere (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021) which means “to move” and was theorized by ancient Greeks (Pakel, 2013) to explain why
a person makes certain choices, engages in certain actions, and expends more effort toward certain actions than others. Motivation connects virtually all aspects of political decision-making (Gaines & Kantack, 2020), so it is important to understand some of the early influences regarding motivation to understand the present influences. In general, motivation theories intend to explain why humans think and behave as they do (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). Dörnyei and Ushioda explain that the direction and magnitude of human behavior involve choices, persistence, and effort. The motivation driving that behavior is responsible for why someone chooses to do something, how long they will do it, and how hard they will work at it.

Motivational theories explain why humans think and behave as they do. These behaviors have aspects that can be applied to the motivations of school board members. For example, Pakdel (2013) categorized motivations or “motives” into three groups: physical, social, and mental. Dinibutun (2012) categorized theories of motivation into content theories and process theories. Content theories focus on an individual’s needs and aspirations, or what motivates a person, whereas process theories focus on how motivation occurs and attempt to identify the actions required to influence behavior. Some popular and well-known content theories include Maslow’s (1943) paper, “A Theory of Human Motivation,” and McClelland and Burnham’s (2008) acquired needs theory. Well-known process theories include B.F. Skinner’s (1957 as cited by Gordan, 2014) reinforcement theory of motivation and Porter and Lawler’s (1968) expectancy model. Skinner’s and Lawler’s models consider performance as a whole and point out that effort does not equal performance. Dinibutun (2012) argued that job satisfaction is dependent upon performance. Maslow (1943, 1954) argued that human beings have basic needs, which include physiological, safety, social, esteem, and self-actualization needs. Maslow’s area of esteem needs refers to the desire to be respected, feel important, and be appreciated. McClelland and
Burnham’s (2008) acquired needs theory refers to individuals who have a high need for achievement, affiliation, and power. The need for affiliation and power is interesting when considering motives for school board members; however, the need for power could be both destructive and altruistic.

**Motivation and School Boards**

Mountford and Brunner (1999) examined how motivations for school board members influenced board members’ agendas. Mountford and Brunner’s findings stated that board members with personal agendas were more likely to micromanage, reformers were more likely to be collaborative, and members with personal agendas negatively influenced other members’ decisions. Mountford’s (2004) research on school board/superintendent relationships asked school members to define power on a continuum and described board members’ conception of power as “power over” and “power with” the superintendent. Board members’ conception of power in this study had a direct relation with the type of motivation board members would have for service. Mountford found that almost half of the board members were largely motivated by personal reasons. Mountford’s (2004) results, when compared to Mountford and Brunner’s (1999), would imply that the majority of school board members’ motivations were likely to negatively impact collaborative processes and full board participation in the decision-making process.

**Altruism and Public Service Motivation**

According to IASB (2022), school board members should possess certain characteristics such as trustworthiness, a genuine interest in the welfare of the school, moral integrity,
contextual awareness, concern for social justice, and a willingness to engage in open dialogue on behalf of the district. These characteristics embody qualities of altruism and public service. Altruism is understood as selflessness and having consideration for the well-being of others without self-benefit (Piatak & Holt, 2020); however, Mountford’s (2004) research found that board members serve for neutral, personal, or altruistic reasons. As mentioned previously, effective school board members often have altruistic qualities; however, not all board members are considered effective or run and serve on the school board for altruistic reasons (Garn & Copeland, 2014; Mountford, 2004). When understanding the motivations of school board members, a current theory that applies to this review is that of public service motivation (PSM). Contrary to the dissatisfaction theory, which may focus on the status quo, PSM is described by Wang et al. (2020) as a multidimensional construct that endorses moral concerns in democratic institutions.

There are many constructs associated with PSM (Bozeman & Su, 2014). One construct described by Perry et al. (2010) is a “form of altruism or prosocial motivation that is animated by specific dispositions and values arising from public institutions and missions” (p. 452). Perry et al. concluded that at the heart of PSM is the idea that “individuals are oriented to act in the public domain for the purpose of doing good for others and society” (p. 687). In a recent study, Zubair et al. (2021) found that public officials who are motivated by a desire to improve the social world and its citizens tend to perform better in their organizational duties. The study concluded that PSM is crucial for public administration practitioners who face various complexities and challenges including the efficient use of resources, responsiveness to the public, and achieving the goals of PSM. Specifically, the study found that altruism and perceived social impact play a positive role in mediating the relationship between PSM and organizational performance.
PSM has been associated with a variety of prosocial or altruistic behaviors, such as volunteering one’s time, giving to charities, and donating blood (Houston, 2006; Piatak & Holt, 2020). PSM individuals are also said to be more spiritual than their for-profit counterparts (Houston & Cartwright, 2007) and are characterized by an ethic built on benevolence and a desire to affect the community (Houston, 2006). Since Illinois public school board members are not compensated for their time or service in a monetary sense, one could argue that PSM individuals could be defined as elected altruistic volunteers motivated to contribute to the public good through service that is compassionate, just, respectable, patriotic, and transcendent.

Researchers have used at least four different methods (Brewer & Selden, 1998; Naff & Crum, 1999; Perry, 1996; Rainey, 1982) to calculate PSM (Perry et al., 2010, p. 682). Perry’s (1996) multidimensional PSM construct is similar to Mountford’s (2004) work on school board motivations. Perry’s (1996) construct is associated with six dimensions: attraction to public policy-making; commitment to the public interest; civic duty; social justice; self-sacrifice; and compassion. When considering the local school board members’ motivation to serve, several, if not all, of these dimensions, should resonate with the community and be altruistic motivation for school board member service to promote moral concerns among its constituents.

Piatak and Holt (2020) differentiate PSM from altruism by explaining that PSM is a more specific form of altruism and that PSM can be targeted to specific members of the public such as municipalities or school boards. PSM is also different from altruism because PSM focuses on where the call of action or motivation to serve is directed and less on why an individual is motivated to serve. This contrast is important concerning the recent health crisis and other controversial topics (Kretchmar & Brewer, 2022; Roegman et al., 2022; Strauss, 2022) that schools are facing. School board elections often elect board members based on character,
personality, and social ties to the community (Garn & Copeland, 2014) rather than on Perry’s (1996) PSM construct.

During the health crisis of 2020, people gathered to express themselves at local school board meetings (Hartney & Finger, 2022; Kretchmar & Brewer, 2022; Roegman et al., 2022; Strauss, 2022). The “why” of their motivation was reinforced by the sudden dissatisfaction with their environment leading to feelings of unhappiness, which diluted altruism and good governance constructs. Garn and Copeland’s (2014) research on voting theories included dissatisfaction theory and capture theory rather than PSM. According to Garn and Copeland’s perspective using dissatisfaction theory, unless something earns the voter’s attention, voters often vote according to the status quo (p. 22) and look to candidates that they respect and trust. When the attention of the voters is captured, and voters become unhappy, voters turn out in much higher numbers to vote. When considering capture theory, Garn and Copeland stated that groups such as unions or professional associations influence elections in similar ways. In the wake of the 2020 health crisis, Hartney and Finger (2022) found evidence that partisan politics, in more instances than science, shaped school district openings which also challenged board members' character and social networks. Constructs such as dissatisfaction theory, capture theory, and partisan politics do not promote the moral concerns or dimensions of PSM.

Wang et al. (2020) focused on the moral theory or the moralization of public service and argued that multiple moral domains shape the meaning of public service. Wang et al. focused on five innate moralities as potential antecedents of PSM: care, fairness, authority, loyalty, and sanctity. Wang et al. illustrate how PSM can be constructed through the lens of cognitive science, showing how moral foundations can separate the elements of PSM. Wang et al. argue that moral foundations such as social stimulus, social perception, and social behaviors are
associated with certain aspects of PSM, which has a different type of influence on social cognition. For example, if the suffering and neediness of others stimulate a response to a type of “moralized” public service in certain individuals, they are more likely to engage in behaviors such as social volunteering and donating to charity. Wang et al. concluded that PSM is a motivational model built on a logic of appropriateness and that PSM is associated with “a pluralistic set of moral concerns that people can associate with their life experiences and social environment to establish a sense of public morality” (p. 12). When people feel motivated to contribute to the public good, they not only regard public service as compassionate and just but also as respectable, patriotic, and transcendent.

**Criticism of PSM**

Neumann and Schott (2021) noted four dimensions of PSM in their digital co-production study (self-sacrifice, compassion, attraction to policy-making, and commitment to the public interest) and found that citizens with higher levels of PSM were more likely to participate in government/public co-production self-reporting programs. Neumann and Schott is another example of volunteerism, charitable behavior, and public service. In this study, people were asked to voluntarily self-report problems with a form of public service delivery to enhance the quality and/or quantity of services received. Neumann and Schott found that individuals with higher levels of Public Service Motivation (PSM) are more likely to perform prosocial actions, such as reporting damage to public property to the city of Zurich. However, some critique this study and the concept of PSM in general, arguing that it assumes people have a moral obligation or ethical responsibility to serve the greater good or report damage, as was the case in the city of Zurich.
In more recent years, the number of publications on PSM has continued to increase (Ritz et al., 2016), and with that, the scrutiny of PSM concepts, models, and measurement has increased as well (Bozeman & Su, 2014; Schott & Ritz, 2018). O’Leary (2019) critiqued public service motivation and listed three conceptual problems. First, some people are more altruistic than others. Second, PSM ignores how the civil servant defines public interest and how decisions are made to further the public interest. Lastly, O’Leary states that there have been theoretical flaws and a distinct lack of interest in PSM models. O’Leary explains that all human beings engage in both instrumental and expressive behaviors (p. 87). O’Leary explains that one example of expressive behavior includes voting behavior, but can also include duty, morality, and beliefs. According to O’Leary, one could conclude that PSM relies on expressive behaviors such as voting and morality to endure for the public arena to be successful. If the public is less motivated and has fewer altruistic qualities, democracy and public services (i.e., school board membership, blood donation, volunteering) may suffer.

Conclusion

Motivation is a topic that is widely discussed, as it is a crucial factor in driving human behavior and promoting social connections. It is essential for initiating human behavior, and involves setting goals and creating a mindset for individuals to run for office and share their ideas and character with others. The sharing of ideas involves many conceptual elements. Trust in a board/superintendent relationship was one of the more important elements. Having a transformational leader is also beneficial for organizations. However, there has been little research in recent years on the motivations of school board members and how their governance and management approaches impact school effectiveness. Research has explored various
leadership concepts related to school effectiveness, which have linked pro-social behaviors and altruism to good governance, but has not directly connected motivation to why people decide to run for something like the school board. By understanding these links, the role motivation plays, and the differences between governance and management, we can create a bridge for effective school governance. Paper 2 will address this bridge and explore whether school board motivations have changed over time, and how those motivations impact governance in public schools.
References


THE ROLE MOTIVATION PLAYS IN SCHOOL BOARD GOVERNANCE

Paper 2 presents the results of a qualitative study that explored the following research questions:

1. Are the reasons people run for the school board primarily personal, altruistic, or other?
2. How do the motivations of school board members align with research on effective governance and motivation?
3. How do school board members perceive the superintendent/board relationship, and how do those perceptions align with their motivations?

The data collected for this study provides a better comprehension of the role motivation plays in governing effective school boards. It also helps foster a healthy superintendent/board relationship by enabling superintendents to better understand the motivations of board members and their perception of their role in serving the school board. This information is especially useful for newly hired superintendents as they familiarize themselves with their board members, and for existing superintendents who have newly elected board members. It is also important to understand board members' motivational trends over time to ensure a positive superintendent/board relationship. By understanding and taking into account the board members' motivation for service and the superintendent's leadership style, the district can be managed more efficiently.
Methodology

My research is centered on comprehending the underlying motivations that guide the decision-making process of school boards. The objective is to identify how these motivations can be utilized to improve the effectiveness of superintendents in leading a school district and serving the community. To achieve this, I carried out interviews using the grounded theory qualitative method to gather relevant data for analysis. Stahl and King (2020) explain that qualitative research is positioned to provide researchers with “process-based, narrated, storied, data that is more closely related to the human experience” (p. 26). Qualitative research and methodology facilitate an “extended exploration of in-depth descriptions of human social life” (Durdella, 2019, p.4). In contrast to testing a hypothesis, my research involves questioning and learning from folks as they carry out their daily lives, making the qualitative approach most appropriate for my research (Yilmaz, 2013). The findings of my study will contribute to the existing understanding of superintendent training and leadership preparation programs by providing insight into any potential changes in board member motivations over time. This research could also be utilized in the development of school board member training programs, similar to those available for superintendents.

Site and Participants

During the interviewing process, five newly elected board members from five different districts were invited to participate. These members were searched for and selected from rural, urban, and suburban school districts using public records from the school district websites. The purpose of each interview was to determine the motivation behind their decision to run for the
board, what leadership qualities they looked for in a superintendent, and what factors they consider when making decisions. Newly elected members were chosen due to recent events and the influence those events had on their motivation to run. It was deemed appropriate to interview newly elected board members to achieve these goals.

A demographically diverse convenience sample with a comparable number of males and females was interviewed (Durdella, 2019, p. 188). The board member applicant pool consisted of two rural males (rm) and one rural female (rf), one suburban female (sf), and one urban female (uf). The five selected will be referred to as: (RM1), (RM2), (RF), (SF), (UF). See Table 2.1 for school district demographics.

Table 2.1

School District Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Enrollment K-12 students</th>
<th>District Population</th>
<th>Racial Diversity</th>
<th>Graduation Rate %</th>
<th>Low income 6-yr.avg. %</th>
<th>Buildings in Unit District</th>
<th>Population density (people per sq. mile)</th>
<th>Housing density (units per sq. mile)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RM#1</td>
<td>800-900</td>
<td>+/- 3700</td>
<td>90% White, 5% Hispanic</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1300</td>
<td>479</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RM#2</td>
<td>400-500</td>
<td>+/- 1000</td>
<td>97 White, 10% Hispanic 85% White, 10% Hispanic</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1300</td>
<td>314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RF</td>
<td>700-800</td>
<td>+/- 3500</td>
<td>91 White, 3% Hispanic 93% White, 10% Hispanic</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1100</td>
<td>450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SF</td>
<td>6100 – 6200</td>
<td>+/- 60,000</td>
<td>80 White, 16% Hispanic 67% White, 16% Hispanic</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UF</td>
<td>3400 - 3500</td>
<td>+/- 30,000</td>
<td>70 White, 26% Black 40% White, 26% Black</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

See Table 2.1 for school district demographics.
Study Procedure

For my research, I conducted a qualitative, semi-structured open-ended interview with five newly elected board members. The interviews were conducted through Google Meet and recorded for transcription. Research questions were created from a review of the literature. Interview questions were developed to help answer each research question. Google Transcribe was used to record and analyze the responses to the interview questions. Interview data was then categorized by interview questions in a spreadsheet and open coding was used to identify relationships between various concepts and categories based on the data gathered from the interviews (Durdella, 2019 p.103). This allowed the interviewer to ask follow-up questions during the interview process, allowing for the conceptualization of ideas (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Durdella, 2019, p. 102; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). To inform and guide the interviewer's analysis, as well as facilitate the theorizing process, the asking of interview questions and making comparisons were specifically detailed and consistent for each interview. During the interview process, informants sometimes communicated several ideas at once, were conflicted in their answers, had a very short answer, or had a loss for words. Additional follow-up questions were asked to resolve any confusing, incomplete, or unclear answers.

Collection of Data

Data collection consisted of board meeting minutes, observation of a board meeting, a face-to-face pre-interview meeting, and a recorded Google Meet interview. Following the consent for board members to participate, previous months' board meeting documents were collected and reviewed to allow me to gain a better understanding of the district climate and
happenings. The face-to-face introduction meeting was arranged during a scheduled board meeting and took place either before or after the meeting. The informal face-to-face pre-interview meeting included an informal observation of the meeting. Informal observational notes were taken during the board meeting and a Google Meet interview time was scheduled. The interview was recorded and transcribed using Google Meets. Interviews were between 50 and 60 minutes. There were no post-interview meetings.

**Document Data**

To help ensure the reliability of the qualitative data collected during the observation and interview time frames, the board meeting minute documents were reviewed before, during, and after this period. In addition to this, data was also collected from other sources such as press releases, school website information, and news stories. This information was used to provide a description of the environment of the interviewee to aid in the analysis of the qualitative research data. For instance, if the interviewee claimed to be conservative and in favor of low taxes but voted to increase the district levy, it would raise questions about the reliability of the interviewee data. Similarly, if a candidate claimed to practice and believe in governance but was observed managing a board meeting, questioning the superintendent motives, and making their own recommendations that were contrary to the superintendent, it would also compromise the reliability of the data. In addition, candidates mentioned what their campaign’s focused on. Several members’ campaigns were written about publicly in the form of press releases. These press releases also aided in the analysis and were used to ensure the reliability of the data. Press releases and board meeting minutes were examined in an informal manner and were not included
in the open codes or in the analysis of the data in a formal way. The additional document data aligned with each of the interview answers given by the interviewees.

**Observation**

Before conducting formal interviews, I arranged for an informal face-to-face introduction with each participant. These introductions took place at public school board meetings. During the meeting, I introduced myself to the interviewee and took observation notes that could be helpful for the interview. After the board meeting, I scheduled a formal interview with the applicant and answered any final questions they had. This introduction allowed for a more personal connection between me and the interviewee and was intended to build trust and credibility. It also helped us understand each other's communication style better, and for me to better understand the environment in which the board member operates.

**Interviews**

A 60-minute semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant using questions adapted from Mountford’s (2004) study, Perry and Wise’s (1990) work on public service motivation, and Bass’s (1985) behavioral dimensions of transformational leadership. These questions were used as probes to determine whether board members were motivated to serve for personal, altruistic, or other/neutral reasons.

1. What motivated you to serve on the school board?
2. Were there any specific issues going on in the district that motivated you?
3. Were there people who influenced you or asked you to get involved?
4. Are there any events in the past 2-3 years that will influence your approach to school board governance?
Follow-up questions were used based on the participant’s responses or lack of a response to the interview questions. These follow-up questions were used to further determine whether board members’ motivations were personal, altruistic, or other.

These interview questions were used to help determine the style of governance board members exhibit:

1. When it comes to good leadership, how do you think a good leader should manage power? Do you think power should be shared, centralized, no questions asked, etc.? Tell me about a time when you felt like you were in a power struggle.
2. Share with me your decision-making process. What does it look like?
3. How would you describe your communication style? Direct/indirect? How often do you communicate school matters outside of board meetings?
4. What does a good manager look like to you? What do you think a well-managed school district looks like?
5. What role do you think a school board member should play when it comes to governing a school district?

Other interview questions were posed to gain a better understanding of the relationship each board member has with his or her respective superintendent in terms of power and control and the board/superintendent relationship. These interview questions also helped to answer the research question regarding how board members perceive the board/superintendent relationship and how that relationship aligns with their motivations for serving:

1. What does a good public servant look like to you?
2. Describe your ideal superintendent.
3. What leadership style do you hope to see from the superintendent? What are your expectations for how the superintendent will communicate with the school board?

Following the interviews, no follow-up meetings were necessary.

Trustworthiness of the Research

In this study, measures were taken to prevent any potential threats to the quality of the research and to enhance the probability of the study's reliability. For a study to be considered
credible and trustworthy, the data collected must be detailed and comprehensive (Stahl & King, 2020). The constructs from Stahl and King (2020) include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Employing trustworthiness in qualitative research serves as a guide for research practices and the application of findings. Mountford (2004) used triangulation in their study to establish credibility by asking board members about each other and what they think the other member thinks or how they would define a term. Participants' responses for my study were transcribed verbatim to ensure the credibility of the data. The data transferability process was completed simultaneously for all participants. The collection of my data was analyzed and collected from their first board meeting through the interview took place, which took several months but not more than a year. This ensured that research data was collected in a similar context across districts. The collected data was transcribed and analyzed within a month of the interview. Triangulation was not used in my study as in Mountford, however, the interview data was analyzed and cross-checked with board meeting observation notes, board meeting minutes, and public news sources to ensure trustworthiness, dependability, and confirmability in the data. For example, if a board member was recorded to have voted in a different manner in which they described during the interview, follow-up questions or clarifying questions were asked during the interview to ensure trustworthiness in the data.

Data and Identity Management

During the data collection process, personal information was gathered from the participants. This included sensitive topics such as religion, politics, personal relationships, and sensitive conversations, as well as personal information about other individuals. The interviews that were conducted also evoked emotions and feelings that were relevant to their professional or
public careers. To ensure anonymity, the identity of individuals was kept confidential, and pseudonyms were used in place of their real names. The same was true for people that they mentioned during the interview. This was done to minimize any potential negative impact on the organization or the participants themselves (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). I took all necessary steps to keep my research data safe by following IRB procedures. This included having the interviewees sign an informed consent document and storing the data in a password-protected folder that only I could access. During the board observations, I attended anonymously to protect the participants' privacy. In such cases, the IRB consent form was signed either electronically or in private. During the interview process, I made sure that the interview took place in private spaces that protected the confidentiality of the data collection, allowing the interviewee to answer completely and without reservation.

Description of Analysis Process

Before transcribing the interviews, informal notes were taken during the in-person board meeting observations. These notes included observations of the physical environment of the meeting as well as any comments or discussions made by the board participants. The purpose of these notes was to gain a foundational perspective and an overall impression of the community and board procedures, as well as to understand the level of governance that occurs at the school board meeting. These impressions were recorded in a research journal before the interviews and were summarized and included in the interview coding data document along with each interviewee's responses to the interview questions.

After the interviews were transcribed, I examined the interview transcripts holistically using a constant comparative method (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 73). Next, transcribed
interviews were categorized and summarized in a spreadsheet database and categorized by interview answers. For example, responses to the question asking about specific issues going on in the district were transcribed, summarized, and categorized by response and with open coding. Open coding helped to label concepts, and define and develop categories based on their properties and dimensions. This process was repeated for each interview question. The data that emerged allowed further axial and selective coding categories or themes to be identified which allowed research questions to be answered.

Results/Findings

The following section reports the results of three research questions. The first research question aims to determine the reasons why people run for school boards, whether their motivations are personal, altruistic, or other. The second research question investigates how school board members' motivations align with effective governance and behavior. The answers to these questions will help guide governance shifts in education at the board and superintendent levels. The final research question aims to answer how school board members perceive the superintendent/board relationship and how their perceptions align with their motivations in a more or less altruistic environment. Before analyzing the themes of these questions, it was essential to understand the interviewee's holistic views of themselves and their environments as public servants.

Research Question 1

Are the reasons people run for the school board primarily personal, altruistic, or other?
As part of the research, a series of interview questions were asked to determine the reasons why individuals were motivated to run for the school board. The research question had three possible answers: personal, altruistic, and other. Upon analyzing the data, it was discovered that personal reasons were the most common motivation. Altruistic reasons were the second most frequently cited answer. However, even though two interviewees initially stated that their motivation was mainly altruistic, further questioning revealed that they had personal and other reasons as well. Because personal motivations were cited as their primary reason for running, altruistic reasons initially mentioned during the interview were coded and included in the personal themes as personal motivations.

During the data collection process, the third possibility - "other" - was used to categorize any themes that were not classified as personal or altruistic. One such theme that emerged from the interviews was "coalition". The participants spoke about coalition in a less direct way than personal and altruistic reasons, mentioning that they were asked by an individual or group to run for the school board. In Mountford (2001), for example, the term other was used to categorize candidates who were recruited to run for the school board. In my study, individuals and groups also worked to recruit and influence candidates prior to their election as a board member, throughout their motivational process and campaign.

Based on the responses from the interviewees, the personal themes that emerged from the data were identified as sociocultural, political, and economic influences. The next sections delve deeper into the complex personal influences, experiences, and mechanisms that board members cited as contributing to their motivations for running for the school board.
Sociocultural Influence

Interwoven into these personal motivations were sociocultural influences such as social isolation and support, racial and cultural aspects, personal and environmental stressors, neighborhood characteristics, and education policy. Several members expressed their motivations and influences for running for the board as being those of a personal nature such as family, trust, accountability, status, protection, and feelings. These sociocultural influences were closely related to the interviewee’s personal motivations.

For example, RF talked about her personal feelings regarding the pandemic and transgender issues at her children’s school. She talked about the lack of trust, protection, and accountability from the school board and administration during the pandemic and with a transgender issue at the school, which influenced and motivated her to run for the board:

I was disappointed in how nobody protected our kids, nobody listened to the community. When the community showed up at our meetings and said we want to fight this, we don’t want to mask our kids. The school board wasn’t listening to the community, and I think sometimes, the school board gets lost on what their role is. It isn’t to do what we think is necessarily the best. It’s our role to go out to our community and find out what this community wants and then try to do right by them. So between our prior admin, they weren’t in my opinion being held accountable at all, even though we had some really great people on the board, they weren’t being held accountable, and our kids suffered because of it. So, that was my first and foremost reason. Then you start throwing in this whole transgender issue and I once again saw that no one was willing to stand up and actually protect our kids. Our girls were very, very adamant that they did not want biological boys in their private spaces and the adults who were supposed to protect those kids refused to protect those kids because they were being threatened financially and I felt awful for the position that they were put in. But in the end, I am the type of person when it comes to kids, I’m laying my life down, first and foremost. They will be protected and if that means another lawsuit, that’s another lawsuit, and that’s not what I want at all, but I’m done being a quiet observer in my child’s education.

RF went on to further talk about some of the people in her community who would reach out to her and her husband for help. She was also upset at the lack of leadership at the board
level. She described how she felt like her family was in the middle of everything that was happening and how personal these issues became for her and her family:

So, one example I can give you is when three kids had close contacts during COVID-19, one of them was [my son]. They removed [my son] from the band during homecoming, but they let two football players finish the game. I did not want those football players pulled at all, and I actually refused to even bring that up to them that evening. I called out to the high school principal and said, Hey, what’s the deal? I know these other two players were with [my son]. You guys pulled [my son]. [My son] lost his s*** on me. [Our superintendent] saw the whole thing and when I approached the board about it, the board told me they knew I was telling the truth, yet they were not willing to hold the admin accountable for their actions. So that would be one. There were multiple times that [my husband] and I had emails back and forth that showed that [the administration] were not being truthful. Again, our board did not hold them accountable. We were not the only parents struggling. There were lots of parents who weren’t getting answers. We were not receiving truthful answers at all about what was happening with our kids. We were basically told to mind our own business.

RF continued to talk about how depressed she became and how helpless and powerless she felt that she couldn’t help her community or her own family. Additional factors continued to build within her, which further caused her concern, influenced her to get involved, and motivated her to run for the school board as she describes here:

I was extremely depressed because I felt like there was nothing I could do to protect my kids. [With] everything going on in the world, I felt like this was a way that I could get involved in a local small way and hopefully that’ll continue to grow. Like, I’m hoping to reach out to other local school districts and talk about their library book policy because that’s gonna be another issue. I really hope that we can start working together as districts to fight some of this stuff and protect our kids. So that’s my bottom line hands down.

Another personal example came from SF. She became involved with the school and students during the pandemic by hosting and facilitating a LGBTQ+ youth group for teens aged 13–17 years old. She made close relationships with this group through the years, which prompted several members to ask her to speak at a school board meeting regarding book bans. Her experiences speaking to the board would later lead to her being approached to run for the school board. She describes how she became involved:
Well, I happen to have several kids in that group who attended school. So when the book challenges started, my kids…reached out to me and said, you know, this is something that’s happening. Something that we think is, you know, is not okay. These are the books that are being targeted. The books were… written by either people of color or LGBTQ+ authors…So, you know, it wasn’t an easy choice. My wife and I had many conversations. We actually sat down as a family and talked about it, but essentially I felt an extreme pull to really, you know, go for it. Give it my all.

RM2 talked about how important it was for him and his school district to survive in his small rural town and how important it is for his children to be able to experience the same childhood experiences that he did growing up. He expresses his thoughts:

Also being born and raised in [this district] and still living [here], I have a lot of community pride. And want to ensure that our school district is able to survive. I know it’s not easy for small school districts in Illinois anymore, but I want to ensure that our school district is viable for years to come, so my kids can get the same experience that I had…if you take the school out of [our town], it basically becomes a ghost town. There’s really no reason to live there anymore without a school district. Not a lot of jobs there. So, that was really one of the main drivers.

RM1 also talked about how important it was for him to personally be involved in the district. His children and grandchildren were all in favor of him becoming a member of the board and encouraged him to run. He currently has grandchildren who attend the school and children and grandchildren who were in the process of moving back to the area to become part of the school district. He explains his reasoning:

I’ve got grandkids that are in the school now and so I just kind of keep in touch with what’s going on with the schools and stuff and I have a great interest in seeing that kids succeed and just make sure the environment at the school is… I don’t know how I want to say it… worthy of a good educational experience for the kids.

RM1 also expressed his concerns about some of the sociocultural issues going on in education currently which influenced him and motivated him to run. He answered:

I guess the stuff that was kind of going on [at another district] with the student that was transgender and wanted to participate in girls’ sports, bothered me also. I know Illinois is a pretty liberal state and there is a law that you know that has to be allowed and the school district found out financially that’s how it’s going to be, right? It’s a difficult
thing. You got to kind of walk that line now, but I get it, I guess that would be another thing that kind of prompted me to run, not that I would ever go to the extreme that [the other] school board did. I do want to follow state law, but I question state law. I think we all do.

UF’s description of her personal experiences growing up and attending school were much different than what she was experiencing in her school district. She expressed that the policies in her district for suspending and expelling students, in her view, did not take into consideration the sociocultural factors that students and families are facing now. She expressed her personal thoughts on the matter in this way:

You have to realize that the way we grew up, the way my kids grew up, are not the same as the way these children are growing up right now. And they’re dealing with some unimaginable things. When we were coming up, you didn’t know what was happening. It wasn’t spoken. Now things are more open and so we have to as people, as human beings, as board members, as teachers, principals, whatever position within a district, we have to understand that they’re not from peaches and creams. So when we make a decision as to whether this student is going up for expulsion because he hit someone in the moment of anger… not maliciously trying to attack that person personally, you know, those things bothered me. And my voice just wasn’t enough. And so that was why I felt I needed to be on the board. So that the board understood the situations and the circumstances that happened [with the student] or happened [in the past]… I’m not prejudiced. I don’t see kids and people with skin color. I know we’re different but we still are the same. We still bleed red, we still are born, and we still die. You know, it’s just that our backgrounds are different. Sometimes, our skin color is different, you know, those types of things, and people don’t take those types of things into consideration and I think that’s just not fair for not only the students but the parents as well. So, now I’m on the board…so that was my reasoning to hopefully make an impact on all kids, not just the kids who needed the extra attention… because I can still do that by volunteering.

UF also described how personal her decision was to her in making a difference in the lives of at-risk young people, how conflicted she became, and how she went about making that difference in those young people’s lives. She referenced several times how God was a factor in her decision-making process both professionally and personally. She described how she worked as a high school secretary for the dean’s office for many years to help make a difference in directly influencing youngsters and staff during times of crisis, but as time went on, she became...
frustrated and felt her influence needed to come from a different place, so she stopped working at the school and continued to volunteer. She describes this in the following way:

I wanted to make a difference with the ones that were coming to the office. So I stayed there almost 30 years to try to do that. But it became a battle. Because people didn’t understand that kids’ behaviors stem from things other than what’s going on at that moment. You know what I mean? Oh, Um, I was fighting against other people’s thoughts and beliefs and it became just a battle for me to go to work. So, I knew it was time for me to come out. So, I just continued to volunteer and to meet with certain kids that they felt really needed the most attention. So I did that for five years. And then I decided after hearing something about the school board that maybe I needed to check that out. And so I did for a few months and tried to get insight from different employees within the district about things that they felt needed to be addressed that weren’t. And so that was my reasoning to hopefully make an impact on all kids, not just the kids who needed the extra attention… because I can still do that by volunteering.

UF also elaborated on the racial conflict and hatred that exists in her district and how this also influenced her to get involved in a different way, later motivating her to run for the board. She described how the racial conflict was exacerbated, as so many things were, by the pandemic.

The racial conflict that has been going on these last few years, I won’t say it started, because it’s always been there, it’s just not been so… Well if I might, um, people just are more free and bolder to be able to speak on their hatred. And that’s what it is... It’s just hatred. And for what, because just one black person or one white person did something in your whole entire life that was negative? You cannot make every black person or every white person accountable for one person’s actions. So I think that was another shocker for the district. Because they act like there’s no racism. For the longest, it was just undercover hatred, but now, it’s just all open and they’re not accepting the fact that this is real.

The data suggests motivations including personal influences were not cut and dry or something as simple as I don’t like the coach. These sociocultural influences that spurred members’ motivations to run as school board members and become involved at the board level were complex and multifaceted.
Political Influences

Political influence and political socialization were evident in the interview data as well. The data suggests that political socialization in public education can take many shapes and forms and suggests that societal norms, such as political policies and principles, are constantly being challenged by society and the media. Politics was a theme that was anticipated in the data from the beginning; however, the level of political socialization and coalition found in the data was not anticipated and was not evident in the literature review. The data suggests that board members were politically influenced during their campaigns, prior to being elected, by having others assert their power and their sociocultural influences in a non-aggressive manner to affect who would run and become elected to the school board.

Interviewees told their stories of how they were influenced politically to become a candidate. Political influences were evident and, in some cases, could be viewed as partisan although no political party affiliation was mentioned by the interviewees during the data collection process. Also present during the interviewees’ campaign was a coalition among the candidates and other individuals and/or groups. Political influences often took the form of coalitions which were also intertwined with sociocultural influences. In several instances, groups of people met with the candidate and came together with them around a common goal. For example, political coalition was very evident in SF, and the data suggests that coalition was an early influence in motivating her to run for the school board, as she explains here:

So shortly after [the book bans], I kind of dug in and started attending a few more meetings, really trying to kind of get my footing… So I did a little bit more research and then I was actually approached by several teachers, several librarians in the district who said, Hey, we’re a little bit worried. Essentially, the other candidates…were fringe candidates. So, extremist candidates, looking to push a very specific agenda…I knew one of the librarians who had asked me. She had been a librarian for my girls when they were
little. A lot of the teachers that had asked me had some sort of interaction with me before. Whether they worked with me from a parent perspective, or we just kind of knew each other from passing, and some were complete strangers. I worked with our local teacher’s union. I went through the interview process to be endorsed, and you know, some of those friendships have grown stronger. They’re able to really talk to me because there are a lot of times I find that there’s a lot of fear when it comes to the school board…Not only for the teachers and the librarians, but for the students that have contacted me, and for future students. I ran so there would be a safe space within the board to ensure that, you know, when you look at your board, you see a diverse board which I think is really important. So, I ran, and it was a very difficult campaign.

SF also expanded on her political viewpoint and what it means to her as a board member:

I think to be naive to current events is to walk in uneducated about the situation. However, I think it’s really important that the school board is nonpartisan. It’s a nonpartisan position. So, when it comes down to it, how it impacts the way I govern or the way that I function on the school board is ensuring that when we’re looking at something that could essentially become very political, very fast. Ensuring that I present my viewpoints and my feelings as fact geared towards students, teachers and staff as a rule of thumb and not take something personal like I mentioned earlier. You see books banned by people of color and you have kids of color you’re going to immediately take that personally and have a lot more of an emotional reaction to that then maybe another parent. However, when I sit down at the board, I try to not necessarily take the emotion out of it because you are, you know, governing what happens with a school. It’s important. You should feel something for sure, but not take it personally. Looking at the decisions of what best suits our teachers, what best suits our kids, what best suits our staff.

RM2 was influenced politically through political socialization. The coalition that was formed was with two existing board of education members. Other potential candidates who were running in the community did not have the same coalitions as he had:

There was nothing that was driving me to be on the school board… I was approached by a couple of other school board members. I had talked to one who was getting off of the school board who had approached me a couple of different times saying, Hey I’m up in two years, you know, I think you would be a level-headed business-minded person that would be a good fit.

Unlike the other interviewees, RM2 did not cite any specific political issues from a state or local policy level that influenced him and motivated him to run. If anything, he stated that the
absence of the pandemic-era issues helped in his decision to run. He noted that he had a neutral stance with state and local policies enacted during the pandemic. He stated:

I tried to help people understand that, you know, the school district’s hands are tied. They’re not purposely trying to make life more difficult by wearing masks. I guarantee teachers, admin, and students, nobody wanted to wear a mask or people didn’t want to do the eLearning but there were really no other options, you know. It was something that just had to be done. I’m glad we’ve since moved on and hope that it doesn’t happen again.

RM1 spoke about his coalition with the superintendent and his desire to see the school district move in a certain direction as being a big influence in motivating him to run. The most recent election did not have any candidates run for a vacant seat, which allowed a write-in candidate to win with only a handful of votes. The write-in candidate appeared to have a clear agenda from the beginning of his tenure based on comments that he had made and documentation from past board meeting minutes. This motivated RM1 to get involved and run for the school board in the most recent election. He commented regarding this:

There is a board member currently serving that I think is pretty much just one-sided. He is motivated primarily just from the tax side of it …and maybe not so much interested in providing good programs for the kids and stuff. And so that, along with our superintendent calling me and saying, “Hey would you consider coming back again?” That’s probably why I ran. Knowing what I know about [that] board member and his desire to maybe recruit some other board members who are like-minded to the things that he wants to accomplish prompted me to run also. I don’t want to see the board go down that rabbit hole and then if it’s gonna hurt the kids it’s gonna hurt the school. If his only focus is on trying to reduce taxes and not make any improvements to the school, don’t change the curriculum at all… [At] his very first [board] meeting…[when] he was a new board member, he walked in [before the meeting started] and he was walking around and looking at the library books and it was like he was already scanning the books. He was like okay, I don’t think this book should be here… this book should be here… I don’t think that’s right, I mean in the library a kid can check out a book if he wants, or he doesn’t want to. And yeah, that bothered me.

UF also spoke of her coalitions with the superintendent and several employees of the school district prior to running and becoming elected.
I asked God for confirmation as to whether this was what I was really supposed to be doing or if it was just something that I was doing on a whim. So, I asked… Send me three people to confirm my decision, and he did. [The superintendent] contacted me, a couple of people from the teachers’ union and [people] within the district, and then a fourth one was from [our] county democratic office. And so, I was like, you know, this, I guess, this is what I’m really supposed to be doing. I asked you to do a certain thing and you did that thing, so here we go. And, so, I went in with both feet.

RF talked about how she was somewhat naive to the political world around her before the pandemic. She described how she and her husband had other parents seeking them out during this time and how a coalition was formed with parents to combat some of the issues in her district. The issues included COVID policies, vaccine mandates, transgender policies, controversial library books, and the lack of accountability from the administration and the board of education. She expressed how these issues led members in her community to form a coalition, the influence those issues had in her life, and how they motivated her to become a candidate and get involved at the board level:

Yeah, [my husband] and I had kind of become the middle people. We had parents calling us probably, at least twice a week with issues. And the reason they would call us is because they would go to the admin, they would not get an appropriate response, and then they wouldn’t know what else to do. So, it kind of came down to [my husband] and I taking these things on… I thought people had integrity because that’s just how God wants us to live our lives. Like, I just assumed that, and COVID kind of broke me a little bit. I went from being a super optimistic and a positive, trusting, person to holy s***I don’t trust anybody. And that’s been hard because it’s not who I really am. I wasn’t somebody that was going to question everything and so it’s different. It’s a very different mindset. I feel like I am very much the mother bear, protecting these kids, focused on their education, but we can’t educate them until we know they’re protected and safe… I was extremely depressed because I felt like there was nothing I could do to protect my kids. Everything going on in the world. And I felt like this was a way that I could get involved in a small local way and hopefully that’ll continue to grow…

According to the data, political influences often took the form of coalitions. The data suggests that coalition played a significant role in motivating interviewees to run for the school board. The examples of coalitions included superintendents influencing individuals, as well as
various sociocultural motivations intertwined with politics. The majority of the time, political and sociocultural influences appeared together, indicating that neither took precedence over the other.

**Economic Influences**

Economic influences were not as prevalent in the data as sociocultural and political influences; however, they were mentioned in several instances by the interviewees. The data suggests that economic factors were present in several different forms.

For example, UF spent time during her campaign meeting with school district staff to discuss compensation, taxes, and equitable pay. Of her three reasons for running, two of the three were economic: employee finances through compensation for employees and the amount of taxes assessed by the school district to elderly residents on their tax bill:

> to make sure that our staff and faculty felt that their voice was heard, and their needs were met. And then the third one was for my constituents, especially my elderly constituents, understanding they’re on fixed incomes, and their resources are limited… And if we continue to increase taxes and things like that, the impact that it has on them, the stress and the strain [it has on them] to not make ends meet.

UF continued to explain the economic influence and how she learned about the different contracts that the district negotiates and how employees are compensated within her district. The impact that had on her and her campaign is expressed below:

> Well, after speaking, with quite a few employees, I saw that there were some things that weren’t fair depending on your position. I understand our teachers need to get paid. Yeah, they do a lot. They have our children, more than parents have their children, so I understand they need to be compensated for the time, the effort, and the abilities that they implement to our students. But we have other people within the district who have just as much impact, like our paras. Um, the paras, to me, have always been at the bottom of the totem pole as far as pay is concerned. You know, those one-on-one paras, they sometimes do more for that student, and they’re not compensated, you know? Just talking to different people at different levels of the district I felt we needed to work on some things.
Not only the paras, but also our lunchroom staff. They come in and they never get recognized but maybe once a year for the things that they do, and they definitely don’t get recognized in their pay, you know? Within the district, we have to do better. So that was one of my goals.

SF talked about economics from an equity and socioeconomic standpoint. Although the book bans had a significant influence in motivating her to run for the board, she also spoke on equity at a board meeting prior to being elected. Her research regarding books caused her to become aware of issues happening at one of the schools in her district:

I also spoke at one more board meeting before I was elected and that one was specifically in regards to the treatment of kids of color at one of our schools by the administration. So I would say my purpose and the things that drive me are, we’re queer. My wife and I are two queer parents, raising two mixed kids. That’s my motivation. I ran on a platform of equity for teachers and students, and there were a lot of words thrown around like - Equity, No. Equality, Yes. I think there’s a misunderstanding of what equity is and what it could do for a community, and equity is super important to me. I don’t want to look at all of our schools. I want to look at where our socioeconomics are in all of our schools. I want to look at the kids that, you know, don’t have the same resources as maybe other kids in the district. One thing I found when I really started digging into [my district] is that our socioeconomics starts at a very different place than they finish.

SF continued to expand on the economics of her district and how economically complex that issue has been in her community:

We had a landmark vote right at the beginning of my term and it was to move or transition our sixth grade over to the middle school because we currently have our sixth grade in our elementary schools. I think a lot of folks were looking at a lot of the same issues, right? We’re talking about teachers’ jobs, we’re talking about leaving kids in elementary and allowing social-emotional skills to develop further and we’re talking about spatial issues at the middle school. One thing I focused on when I was researching the issue, is where were our schools socioeconomically? Where were they size capacity-wise? I noticed that some of our lowest socioeconomic schools were maxed out, which means that those kids have to go to a different school. And if we’re talking lowest socioeconomic schools, where a kid has to be bused to a different location, that could have multiple impacts, not only student absenteeism, that could have impacts on the parents’ income if they need to drive further. Or, you know, how do you accommodate them if they do not have the resources…Being two blocks from your homeschool or being, you know, miles from it, matters to some families.
RM1 mentioned the importance of how his tax dollars are spent and how much he pays in taxes as a farmer and landowner. He mentioned that he wanted to be sure that his tax money was being spent wisely by the district and that the district was not being wasteful with his money. His response captured that sentiment:

Also, keep in mind, being a farmer, taxes keep going up and up. And so I want to make the best use of the citizen’s tax dollars to provide that education for the kids.

RM2 shared how important it was for him and for his community that the school district survive and continue to be the lifeblood of their community. From an economic standpoint the district is the largest employer in the town and is at the center of the community:

I know it’s not easy for small school districts in Illinois anymore, but I want to ensure that our school district is viable for years to come…if you take the school out of [town], it basically becomes a ghost town. There’s really no reason to live there anymore without a school district, not a lot of jobs there.

The economic influence interviewees expressed included compensation of employees, taxes, socioeconomic impacts, and keeping a school or district viable for years to come.

In summary, the data for Research Question 1 suggests that board members mostly mentioned personal reasons as motivation to run for their school board seat. Of the personal reasons, sociocultural reasons such as family, mandates, and feelings about mainstream issues were the primary drivers of their motivations. In addition to these sociocultural reasons, several members also mentioned political and economic influences such as policy issues, coalition with others, and taxes.

**Research Question 2**

How do school board members' motivations align with effective governance research?
During the process of collecting data, Research Question 2 underwent several changes based on the interviewee's responses. The interviewees' answers highlighted the qualities they believed were necessary for a manager to possess for the school district to be considered successful. The data suggested that the interviewees' descriptions of motivations were related to either governance or a particular leadership style. Initially, the question was intended to provide an opportunity to compare previous studies with this one in order to determine the level of altruism in members' motivations. However, I decided to explore governance and how members' motivations affect good governance to gain a better understanding of motivation and its impact on human behavior while a member of a school board.

During the interviews, certain qualities of governance were expressed. These included prosocial behaviors, transformational qualities, effective solutions, indirect communication, and supportive and holistic community-focused characteristics towards the school district as a whole. On the other hand, there were also certain managerial-type styles or qualities of leadership or motivation expressed by the interviewees that were not effective for governance. These examples included adversarial behaviors towards others, a direct style of communication, accountability amongst people, and language involving the chain of command. As there were no past studies to compare and contrast the data, the research question was revised to focus on the alignment of school board members' motivations with effective governance research.

When considering themes from the second research question. Several open codes resulted in different types of motivational data, which was then used to determine altruistic levels. For example, several descriptions of superintendents involved prosocial qualities. Interviewees also described superintendents that they viewed as adversarial. In addition, interviewees described characteristics of what leadership and a well-managed school district looked like to them.
Examples of administration meeting the basic needs of their constituents were given as well as examples of governing qualities and techniques. There were also inferences to power either with the superintendent or over the superintendent. In several cases, regardless of the relationship with the superintendent, interviewees understood the important leadership qualities needed for a superintendent to be effective in governing. The data suggested that the interviewees understood the basic difference between a governance style of leadership and a managerial style of leadership in their responses; however, the data also suggested that some interviewees would ignore or forgo governing if a topic was personal to them or the topic was something they had a deep understanding with or had experience with.

Inferences of school boards and the administration being transformational and supportive were evident and supported by the data, as were school boards and administration acting in a managerial style. Two main themes emerged from the evidence gathered: governance propensities and managerial propensities. The next sections delve deeper into each of these board members’ motivations and how their propensities may affect the superintendent/board relationship as they serve as a voting member of the school board.

**Governance Propensities**

In order to better describe board member’s behaviors and motivations, two theme buckets were created. Board member observations and interviews revealed a natural tendency or a predisposition for members to act a certain way as a board member. Governance propensities included themes such as: prosocial, transformational, effective, indirect, community focused, supportive and having power with the superintendent.
Of the motivations associated with governance propensities, altruism, prosocial, and transformational qualities were more refined with RM1 and RM2 than with RF, UF, and SF. In both RM districts, the interviewees viewed the superintendent as the main authority figure or chief operating officer and were less likely to argue, question, or micromanage decisions or recommendations that were made by them. The data suggests that they were also less likely to conduct school district business outside of school board meeting times and were less likely to take the extra time to research topics of concern. The following excerpts describe the propensities that data suggest align more strongly with governance.

RM2 talked about the communication style and trust he has in his superintendent and how open and honest the board/superintendent relationship is in his district. He also viewed the brief length of their board meeting as positive and a metric for how well-governed the school district is:

I’ve noticed in the short few months that I’ve been on [the board] it is just the communication that is had between the superintendent, administration, and the school board. I mean you saw firsthand at our meeting the other night…record-setting for a school board meeting, but we have so much communication with the superintendent. He sends out a Friday report every week with the ongoing events in the school and then sends out the board packet on the Friday before the school board meeting. He kind of runs down through the agenda and what’s going to be discussed and asks if we have any questions about anything before the school board meeting. He just doesn’t want any surprises. And then just having trust in the administration to do their job. I think that the board, as a whole, trusts the administration that we’ve got right now a great deal…I think just the communication between board members and the administration that we have, you know, admin trusts the board to make right, good, educated decisions and we trust them to do their job.

RM1 also shared his propensity for governance. He inferred having power with the superintendent rather than power over the superintendent as well as having trust in the administration to do their jobs and argued against a propensity for managing:
I always go back to the retreat for board members and the superintendent. I think the superintendent should have the final say or the ultimate say. I think the board members are there to hire the superintendent. Say, he’ll come to us with a suggestion, and then it’s up to us to say. I don’t want to get involved in the minutiae of what the superintendent thinks, for example, I think Susie should teach fifth grade. It’s kind of like that for principals, too. They want to move these people around a little bit, and that’s their deal. I don’t think the board member should have really much of an input on that. Yeah, I think that the administration knows what they’re doing. You guys are involved in the school, you know school law, and if not, you talk to the attorney. We’re just here to kind of like oversee the whole thing. Our primary job as a board member is to oversee the superintendent and to hire and fire the superintendent.

Entangled Propensities

Of the motivations associated with this theme, the data suggested that the interviewee did understand governance propensities and often cited how important those propensities were as a member of the board in their responses; however, they also described several examples of how involved they are in the decision-making processes at their school district in their interview responses, which contradicts governance propensities. In each of the interviews, board members referred to policy and procedures such as “the chain of command” how important communication is as a board member, and how the board should work with superintendents when making decisions. There was, however, a preponderance of managerial style propensities that set interviewees apart in their responses and caused their motivation to be considered more managerial. In some cases, governance propensities were described by the interviewee; however, managerial and governance propensities became entangled and intertwined in their responses when they were asked to additional questions for clarification. This caused this theme to be differentiated from that of governance propensities to those of managerial propensities, such as administering and overseeing policy, actions, or affairs of the school district.
For example, SF described how important the distribution of power is between the board and administration and expressed how other board members were power-hungry and wanted to directly control what was happening in the school buildings. She talked about how she trusts the administration to make the correct decision. When probing questions were asked about her decision-making process the data suggests a managerial style when making decisions. She describes her decision-making process here on book bans:

Say, for example, a book ban comes up now. The first thing I’m gonna do is I’m gonna make sure that I have the library policies clear, which I already know those policies. I know how our librarians choose our books. We have a policy on choosing the books. I know a librarian is not going to put a non-age-appropriate book in the library. I know how they pick the book. I know why they picked the book. I know that process. The second thing I’m going to do is, I’m going to ask the why, right? Why are these books being challenged and by whom? So, you know why the person is challenging them. What’s their involvement? What was the specific verbiage on the challenge? What is the thought process behind it, right? And then I’m gonna listen to the community. I’m gonna hear community comments, whether they come into the board meeting or whether they come in via email. I’m gonna listen to them. I’m gonna take them in and I’m really going to try to understand where people are coming from. But again, I think it is very important to know that I want to hear from all sides. All directions. If one side is screaming louder than the other, that doesn’t necessarily mean they’re going to win my vote. I want to know where all the sides are coming from, and then I’m gonna make the decision that best suits our students, our teachers, and our staff. I also know we have a policy in place that if a parent doesn’t want their kid to check out a certain book they can prevent that from happening. So in my eyes, if our librarians, followed the policy, meaning the book is age-appropriate for the library that it’s in, and if you know the parent has the ability to restrict the book from a parental level if they would like to and there are no other red flags coming from the comments of the community… I don’t see a reason why that book shouldn’t stay in a library.

In her interview, UF mentions that one of her motivations for running and becoming a school board member was to influence decisions that were made for students disciplined or recommended for expulsion. She describes herself as very direct and someone who offends others from time to time. She described how she makes decisions and how she views the board/superintendent relationship:
I don’t think one individual person should have total leadership over anything or anyone, because we don’t have all the answers. We don’t know everything. And, so, if one person makes a decision that’s going to affect numerous people, you don’t have an objective view… because we all have biases, you know? And so I guess that’s why even the President doesn’t really make all the decisions, because we don’t know everything and I guess that would be my only thing. How can I say this? There was only one man who had all the answers and he walked on water. So we all need help when it comes to making decisions that are going to affect a numerous number of people, types of people, and situations. No one person should have all the power, and so a good leader will, if they’re a good leader, will have a team, and that team I think is like the superintendent and the board. That’s that, that’s a good leader. Now, yes, she could just say no or yes, we don’t need a board, and I’m just gonna make all the decisions, but that’s not being a good leader. So, every leader needs to have counsel. Whether it’s a pastor, superintendent, mayor, or anyone else, everyone needs to have counsel.

UF also shared an example of when she was directly involved in a disciplinary decision with the superintendent.

I’ll give you a for instance. We had a fight. One African-American, one Caucasian, the African American got ten days and the Caucasian got five days. The Caucasian started the fight, initiated the fight. And so I’m like, No, we’re gonna do this the right way or we’re not gonna do it. No, I said it and this is the way it is, and I called [the superintendent], and then the next few minutes, the decision had been turned, you know, she said either you’re giving both five days or you’re gonna give them both 10 days, but we’re not gonna have a disparity like that.

RF was asked to share her perspective on power, leadership, and decision-making. She mentioned several key traits that are essential for a leader to possess to be successful in their role. In recent years, leadership in her district has transformed. Data suggests that previous leadership lacked transformational and prosocial characteristics, such as involving the community in decision-making or communicating the process in which decisions were made. She stated that previous leadership did not communicate effectively. This opened the door for entangled propensities such as adversarial conversations and behaviors that displayed power over board members to emerge, which RF deemed ineffective. This type of communication and style of leadership was not well-received by the community either. RF had lost faith in the system and
lost the trust of the administration from the type of responses she received. RF shared her views on leadership and communication:

I think a good leader really needs to be able to communicate why they make the choices they make, and if a leader can’t explain the ‘why’ to a decision then I think they absolutely deserve to be really questioned and to dig in. I think as parents we’re kind of taught to “know our role” and “stay in our lane” and I was like that, and I agreed with that for a very long time, until I realized that all of our rights as parents are being taken away. So, I just think the leader needs to be able to listen and not just sit there. I think they really need to be thinking about it and coming back and making decisions based off of what’s best for kids, considering what their constituents are telling them, considering, you know, what the community is telling them. I think being a leader is difficult, but I don’t think it’s nearly as difficult as what we make it out to be. I think honesty and integrity are two characteristics that we’re losing. I just thought that doing the right thing, you know, you just do the right thing, and I have seen less and less of that amongst our leaders, which is really disheartening. I think we need to really sit back and think about what leaders look like. I think they need to be a positive influence and I don’t think true leaders are scared of being questioned. When I have a leader, or someone who calls themselves a leader, and I question them on something and they get defensive toward me, that’s really not being a true leader.

In addition to her thoughts on leadership, RF also expressed that she would rather have a conversation with someone directly and admits that she talks about the school and issues affecting it with community members very often outside of board meetings. She expressed that she is in favor of following the “chain of command” but also is aware that people have been ostracized for doing so in her district in the past. She shared how she goes about making decisions here:

So, first, I sit down. I just kind of think by myself, right? I like to think about the pros and the cons, I try to think about whether am I basing my decisions on feelings or off of, you know, actual facts… and then I usually talk it through with [my husband] because being a farmer and a landowner, you know, we pay a lot of taxes and [he’s] a smart guy and has a lot of great things about him. He likes to play devil’s advocate with me a lot. If I’m still struggling, I try to reach out to the other board members. There have been times when I think I feel one way, and then after having conversations with people, there are things they say and I think, okay, they had some really good points. I try to do some self-reflection and reach out to people to get their thoughts and ideas. I then come back and do some more self-reflection. I’m a researcher. I’m gonna hop on and see what materials I can find. But I really think people need to take a minute and stop and think about what
we’re going to do, before we do it. I can get rammy and I can get excited and think, Oh, this sounds like a great idea… So yeah, I think a lot of self-reflection and just kind of reaching out to people is really important as a board member.

Finally, RF expressed what she believes her role is when it comes to governing a school district and how her thoughts on this have evolved:

So it’s interesting, I think because I was on the school board years ago, a few years before I took the elementary position secretary position, and at that time, I was very much, like, I’m gonna try to be the school board member that’s really reading everything from ISBE and reading all the IASB stuff and everything. Every training that I want to though said stay out of the weeds, stay out of the weeds, you know, you govern from up here. And that made sense to me at the time. Looking back at it though, I think they didn’t want me to think for myself. I felt very much like the state was trying to tell me, this is what is right, and this is what you need to convince your community is right. Versus, that the school board is supposed to be a locally driven board. It’s supposed to make decisions from its community members. I think that the state is very much taking away those roles from the school board members and I think they do it by keeping us uneducated on what’s going on in our schools. Um, although I don’t think it’s my role to have my fingers and all these pots, I do think it’s my role to really understand how our students are feeling, how our parents and our taxpayers are feeling, and how our teachers are feeling. I want to know how they’re feeling about things, and I want to be involved.

Many factors determine the level of altruism in school board members' motivations for serving. Altruism is the selfless concern for the well-being of others. The quotes mentioned above indicate that many instances of concern involve the board member on a personal level, either directly or indirectly. In response to the second research question, which is about how school board members’ motivations align with effective governance research, the data suggests that when personal influences come into play, the inclination towards altruism and good governance decreases. Good governance includes being supportive, community-focused, transformational, and having power with the superintendent. When these themes get mixed up with managerial qualities, it results in ineffective governance behaviors to become present in the community and be better represented at the board level.
Research Question 3

How do school board members perceive the superintendent/board relationship, and how do those perceptions align with their motivations?

Several themes emerged from the interview data that helped answer this research question. Board members were asked to describe their ideal superintendent, the relationship they have with the superintendent, and what leadership qualities they expect to see from their superintendent along with other similar questions. Board members were also asked to reflect on their role as a board member and their expectations of the superintendent when governing the school district.

During the questioning process, the data suggests that three common themes were most important to the interviewees. According to the study, the members of a school district prioritize having a superintendent/board relationship that is progressive, transparent, and empathetic. This relationship is essential for the success of the district, and members value it the most. Interestingly, the views of interviewees who had experienced tenured superintendents aligned with the findings of governance and transformational research. However, RF, whose board had recently hired a superintendent, expressed reservations about the motivations behind their board/superintendent relationship as they continued to develop trust in the relationship.

**Progressive**

Board members expressed that they were interested in leaders who make use of, or are interested in, new ideas, findings, and opportunities either in the school environment or from the community’s perspective. The data also suggests that members were in favor of a relationship
that was progressive in solving problems. One example from the data involving the need for progressive leadership was described by RM1: “I think a superintendent should always be kind of looking, looking beyond today. Like what is new and what’s coming… Should we maybe be trying this [new idea]?”

SF perceived her role as a board member as being progressive as well. She stated that you have to be present, available, willing to learn, caring, willing to take the time, and show up and care. She expressed her thoughts here:

So, you got to be present, and I think really, being present, and being available, and being willing to learn is huge. I think the second part is, I guess I could put it as simply as caring, but what I mean by caring is taking that extra time, you know, none of us committed to this role thinking that it would be an easy breezy roll. I think everybody who takes that board position should understand that. There’s a certain time commitment, at least that was a big piece of the conversation around our family table. This is going to take my time and it has, however, I make sure I use my time wisely and familiarize myself with the district so I know who to talk to and who to go to. I also make sure that, when I do put my board member hat on, I’m there in that capacity. If I’m there as a parent, I’m there in a parent capacity. So, I think the biggest thing that I can say is, show up and care.

Transparent

Second, members expressed in the data that it was important to them that superintendents were visible and accessible, especially when it concerned hot topics of a personal nature, and that they were visible outside of controversy on a day-to-day basis. The data suggests that it was important for many board members to see the administration out in the school community and out in the public eye whenever possible, participating in community events and being an active member of society. Trust and honesty were also open codes that appeared often in board members’ descriptions of a superintendent. The data suggested that the more opportunities there were available for relationship building, visibility, involvement, and communication in the
community, the better the chance the superintendent would be perceived as being transparent and trustworthy. RM1 describes this in his statement:

I think you have to be part of the community and be visible in the community I think and have strong leadership skills I think and strong financial skills. Because just in today’s environment with the State aid and to be able to manage all that and then still like to stay viable financially…Just somebody that the kids know. Like when [I ask my] grandkid in fifth grade, I go to him, do you know who our superintendent is? He goes, Oh yeah! There were other times you’d ask a kid who our superintendent was and, wow, no clue. I think when I went to school I don’t know if I knew who the superintendent was at that time, even if it’s just something a kid doesn’t think about, right? You know, you know who your Principal is… Yeah, but you might not know who your superintendent is. Yeah, but I think [our superintendent] makes an effort to get in the buildings, and now a lot of kids know him, too.

RM2 mentions how important it is for the administration to be out and about and visible:

Now, I know I don’t have a lot of experience with other school superintendents, and obviously, they may all do something different, but I keep reiterating this. Communication is very open. He keeps things in front of us at all times. There’s no decision really, that’s made, that’s not very well thought out, and not made known to us, why the decision was made. Our superintendent, along with the two other administrators, they don’t hide out in an office. They’re, they’re always out, you know, guarding the crosswalk meeting kids as they come in, talking to the kids, as they come in. They try and get to know, you know, all the students and get to know a lot of the families.

RF describes how important communication is and how transparent the superintendent should be at school board meetings:

So communication is huge. He sends us weekly updates. You know, here’s kind of what happened this past week. We just had a resignation. He sends us something like that immediately. He doesn’t wait. So if he feels like it, you know, hey, we need to know it right away, he’ll send out an email. He’s very good about communicating with the district by posting on Facebook and sending out messages when needed. He’s trying to be extremely transparent when it comes to our school board meetings in the past. The community felt like a lot of stuff was happening in the closed session that shouldn’t have been happening in the open session. [Our superintendent] knows that is kind of a passion of our board, to be transparent during open sessions… Somebody who is huge on communication. Um, parents have the right to know what is going on with their kids. Somebody who has integrity and who’s going to do what they think is, right, and at the end of the day, he or she, and I might disagree on how to get somewhere, but as long as they are making a decision based on what is best for our students, not our teachers, not our taxpayers, not anybody, but our students, then I think you’ve got the right person.
Transparency is huge. I think somebody who gets, you know, their panties in a bunch because they’re being questioned is not your person. Transparency, communication, and relationship building. Kids first.

**Moral Empathy**

Several of the interviewees talked about the board/superintendent perception and how it could motivate a community. To prevent conflict, the board/superintendent relationship needs to align with the motivations of that community or the topics that they view as very important. The data suggests that superintendents’ relationship should align with the community and school board members to include moral empathy or an upstanding ability to understand others’ feelings. The data suggests that the absence of motivational alignment and moral empathy in school district leadership triggers a response that motivates the community to become more involved in the happenings of the district and school board. One example of this shift was described in my study as a shift from governance propensities to managing. Remediation and interventions are often used in education by authority figures to better control a situation. These actions would be similar to ways in which a community member may respond and become motivated to run and serve on the school board.

To understand and share the feelings of others, the data suggests that board members expect leaders to be involved, hands-on, collaborative, transparent, develop relationships with the community, and be visible and invested in the school and the community. The expectation for the administration to be involved in these ways infers that they will have a greater empathetic understanding of their constituents in a time of need. These experiences or understandings can also be categorized as having moral empathy for their constituents. The data suggests that a lack of moral empathy on the part of the school district or superintendent motivates behaviors in
community members that my not typically be present. These motivations were highlighted in a previous section as governance propensities and entangled propensities.

According to the data, school administrators are expected to demonstrate a certain level of moral empathy to encourage cooperation and prevent aggression. If the school community perceives that the leadership lacks moral empathy, it may lead to frustration among community members and result in negative responses. The negative responses may include forming alliances and expressing concerns at school board meetings. For instance, SF describes a positive example of her superintendent's relationship with the community and provides an example of how she describes his moral empathy:

The relationship that he maintains with our students and our staff, and the way that people recognize him, I don’t know a lot of districts where the Superintendent could walk in the room and kids recognize him. The superintendent is part of the community. You’re the leader. You’re at the top of the top, right? So, yeah, our district, I think is proof of a good superintendent. I think [he] has built that community and you can see it. You can really see it if you just kind of step back and watch him interact. You can see it, you know, he’s always got a fist bump for somebody, he’s always got a hug for somebody. So he’s got a handshake for somebody, you know, he’s always, he’s always got time, even if that time is like a three second fist bump like… Hey, how are you doing? Gotta run. He’s always got time. I’ve never seen that man not say hello and I think that’s important.

RF described how her role as a board member has changed with a different superintendent:

After I got on the board, my phone was blowing up with issues constantly. There was no communication. There was no transparency. You know, people would say, ‘We emailed three times, but we haven’t heard a response.’ Those were the things I was hearing all the time. Now that we have admins who are pushing information out into the community without even having to be asked, my phone blows up with, ‘Thank you, we are so happy with the communication. It is so nice to see some positive things going on in our school district.’ So, I think my role has already started to change a little bit. I still get a lot of phone calls, but I’m not getting as many phone calls as I did a couple of months ago. I think people are starting to think like, Hey, maybe we can trust this guy. Parents are starting to bring forth some concerns and yes, I most definitely think the goal is gonna change… I think a good manager can really build relationships and have people skills. I don’t think you have to be the best and everything. If you can build relationships with
people, understand how to work with people and find their strengths and weaknesses, I think that can get you a long way.

UF talks about what a good board member looks like to her and what the most important quality in a relationship is to her:

I have to go back to honesty. Honesty is the number one for me in every position, not just the school board or the superintendent but with anything in life, the number one thing is, you have to be honest. You have to be able to speak the truth, and love, but still speak the truth.

Board members are public servants who are tasked with listening to the community as well as employing the superintendent. The data suggests that board members and superintendents are expected to be involved in the community and share the same experiences, motivations, and perceptions that community members experience. One of the members, RM2, described his thoughts about being a public servant:

Without people being involved in the school board, and other organizations within the town, you know, nothing gets done, and I think as a public servant, going back to my reasoning for getting on the school board… You do it for all the right reasons. Not because of another agenda… I think it is important for the administration to be involved in the community and other facets, and our current superintendent is doing that. He’s actually our secretary for our Lions Club, and he assists with the [local festival] and so he is community-facing.

RM1 shared his thoughts on how visible and accessible board members and a superintendent should be and some important qualities needed to be successful:

His communication skills are pretty good and he’s visible in the community. I like to see that. We’ve, we’ve had the opposite in the past, where the past superintendents have sat in the office, and they never came out. I don’t think that’s a good leadership style for a board member or a superintendent. Now, I’ve got grandkids kind of involved with school again, but even when I didn’t have children in the school itself, I still try to make a point of getting down here, going to events like a band concert. I like to be out, and the people know who I am, and if they have questions, they can come to me, and the same with the superintendent. I think a superintendent should be visible in the community and participate in community groups… Like my grandkids, Jonathan’s in fifth grade, I go to him, do you know who our superintendent is? He goes, Oh yeah Dr. []! There were other times you’d ask a kid who our superintendent was and, wow, no clue. I think when I went
to school I don’t know if I knew who the superintendent was at that time, even if it’s just something a kid doesn’t think about, right? You know who your principal is? Yeah, but you might not know who your superintendent is. Yeah, but I think [he] makes an effort to get in the buildings, and now a lot of kids know him, too.

The research question aimed to find out how school board members perceive the relationship between the superintendent and the board, and how their perceptions align with their motivations. The findings from the interview questions indicate that the board members consider superintendents and their leadership to be crucial in their school districts and an essential part of the community. Moreover, the study suggests that board members have a clear understanding and consistent view of the leadership qualities required for a successful superintendent/board relationship. During the interviews, the participants revealed that they needed to demonstrate empathy and be able to comprehend and share the sentiments of others in the community while making important decisions for the district and the students under their care. In doing so members shared the importance of superintendents exploring new ideas and being transparent about those findings.

School board members expressed the leadership traits that are important to be an effective leader. They mentioned several building blocks and qualities needed at the foundation of relationships such as honesty, trust, and transparency. They also understood that for a board to be effective, the relationship needs to have open communication and collaboration. Board members talked about how important it was for their superintendent to be visible in the community and have integrity and empathy when tough situations arise. Finally, when working through tough situations, board members recognized and stressed that collaboration was a very important quality as well. The perceived views of members often parallel or align with the motivations of the school board members and what they hope to accomplish while on the board.
When perceptions evolve into motivations and motivations are blocked from evolving into new ideas, the board/superintendent relationship has a greater opportunity to become adversarial.

Summary of Results

The findings from the interviews illustrate that the members have different understandings of their roles as a member of the board. They understand their place in school district governance and their community and they can express their expectations for a healthy board/superintendent relationship, however, each member may have a different definition of those expectations. This is understandable since each member is a part of a different community. For instance, each member expressed the superintendent needs to be a good communicator, being able to convey and exchange information, ideas, and news effectively and efficiently. Some may view a good communicator as someone who accurately communicates district business to the board, while others may define it as someone who builds relationships with district stakeholders.

It was difficult to identify or define altruism from the research data, as the reasons for running for the school board were mostly personal. However, beliefs about effective governance practices and personal motivations often resulted in entangled propensities in governance. The majority of members ran for personal reasons, with some elements of personal altruism intertwined with the data, causing motivations to partially align with effective governance research. The research also found that if members perceive the superintendent to be an effective leader, then they are more likely to align with their motivations as a board member.
Discussion

The purpose of this study is to understand current board members’ motivations for running and serving on the school board. Past studies such as Mountford (2004) and IASB’s effective governance principles (2023) were used as a framework to help contextualize the types of school board motivations and expectations explored in this study. Data collection in this study relied on interviews to encourage discussion with the researcher and allow interviewees the freedom to answer without confinement. The findings from Mountford (2004) were used as a baseline to determine whether the pandemic and other recent events caused board members’ motivations to shift and become more personal or more altruistic (Piatak & Holt, 2020). Mountford’s (2004) findings were consistent with prior research on the same topic in which about half of the members served for altruistic reasons and half for personal reasons.

Motivation for Service

When reflecting on the statements given by the board members in their interviews, I have identified these insights in addition to the findings of my original research question. Altruism could not be clearly identified or defined from the research data as simply as the first research question may have suggested, finding that members’ motivation for running was mostly personal. Mountford (2004) categorized motivations to be altruistic, personal, or other. For members who were identified as running for personal reasons, they also were identified as being more likely to have power over the superintendent as opposed to having power with, or working with, the superintendent.
The results of this study found that not only are members largely running for personal reasons, but the personal reasons included specific and complex sociocultural influences. For example, if the data suggests that if board members who are personally motivated and have a perspective that they have power over the superintendent to make decisions, this will likely lead to ineffective governing principles as described by Lee and Eadens (2014). In addition, if the personal matter is something like an inclusive state mandate, the relationship between the superintendent and the board member may become frustrating and governing, as described by Dervarics & O’Brien (2019), and may become ineffective. Finally, if there are fewer board members motivated to serve for altruistic reasons and are largely motivated for personal reasons and have a personal agenda, how a superintendent governs a board will likely have negative implications for student success as described by Ford & Ihrke (2015) and will result in increased superintendent turnover as described by Tekniepe (2015).

Second, the reasons for running were political. Although political issues or political parties were not directly asked about politics in the interview, partisan politics were inferred and evident in members’ summaries of answers. Members mentioned policies regarding restrooms, transgender, equity, book bans, masks, vaccines, social distancing, school closings, taxes, economics, and other equity-type policies as motivation to run and serve on the school board. Members’ answers included a very clear stance on several controversial topics with many stating they were for a certain policy or against it. One unexpected result in this area included the nonpartisan viewpoints of several members. For example, book ban policies or pandemic mandates involved viewpoints that were nonpartisan and independent for each member. During one interview, a member expressed his financial conservatism. However, he also mentioned that he disagreed with book-banning policies in other districts and believed that students should have
the freedom to read any book they like. It is possible for motivation to be nonpartisan and not influenced by politics. For instance, a superintendent may have a conservative member under their supervision, but the member's motivations may not align with a conservative ideology. In this situation, superintendents should avoid viewing their members solely through a political lens and instead consider them as individuals with unique motivations and beliefs. This approach can be more effective in understanding and supporting members in their work and goals.

Mountford (2004) identified a third category of motivation that was not altruistic or personal, but rather neutral or other. This category was used to classify members who were recruited or recommended to run by a member of the school or community. However, based on my findings, I have categorized these individuals as having a personal motivation to serve, despite mentioning being recruited. There were two instances where coalitions were used for political gain. In each instance, the member was recruited for personal political gain by an individual or a group. In one instance, a member used a coalition to promote the agenda of their group, while in the other instance, a coalition was used to prevent another candidate from running. In both cases, the political influence was exerted to position a candidate and further an agenda or policy.

These examples of political coalitions and members’ nonpartisan views of controversial issues are important for superintendents to understand as they strive to become transformational leaders and work to develop a feeling of trust, loyalty, and respect with their members. To achieve a goal that is for the good of the district, superintendents may need to help board members reflect on and rethink their motivations (Sivarat et al., 2021). Superintendents who understand members’ motivations and can act as transformational leaders who recognize board members’ unique political experiences by listening attentively, advising them, and coaching
them with empathy and support are more likely to positively transform the will and aspirations of the board members. This will also improve the overall cohesiveness of the board (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006).

The final personal theme identified was economic. Many of the members described how they wanted to have a say in how their tax dollars were spent. Several talked about how increasing their school district taxes affected them personally or someone close to them financially. In several instances, members commented on how they wanted to see their tax dollars spent and how they wanted to personally have control or a say in that. These personal economic reasons align similarly to those of Mountford’s (2004) findings on power. Members who are serving for personal economic reasons are also likely to have a view in which they have power over the superintendent and may create a dynamic of management type propensities with regard to economic finances of a district with the superintendent.

For example, it may be important for superintendents to comprehend the following aspects when increasing their levy or negotiating with employees. Suppose a board member does not agree with the superintendent's recommendation to increase the levy and believes that taxes should not be raised. In that case, it may have a long-term negative impact on the school district financially. Furthermore, if the board member thinks that the school district's employees should also be better compensated due to personal reasons, it could create problems between the board member and the superintendent. In this scenario, the board member is suggesting increasing employee salaries without raising taxes, which may require reallocating funds within the budget or accessing reserves in the district's budget to cover the request. In this scenario, the line between a governance style of leadership and managerial style of leadership is being challenged by the board member.
Aligning Governance with Motivation

When reflecting on the statements given by the board members in their interviews in answering the question of how school board members’ motivations align with effective governance research, the data suggests that when personal influences are present, selfless altruism is less present. Beginning with each member’s campaign and reflecting on the takeaways from Research Question 1, the motivations of the participants in this study appear less altruistic than the motivations of participants in other research findings (Mountford, 2004). The research data suggests that members’ reasons for serving are very complex and have multiple layers and several factors included in their decision to run and serve. For example, two participants expressed personal reasons for running in their interviews, but when I observed them at a school board meeting, they demonstrated governance-type behaviors when voting for items on the agenda. These members had personal motivations for running but displayed governance propensities rather than a managerial style of membership.

The data suggests that managerial members were highly involved in meetings and were in collaboration with not only the administration when researching a topic but also collaborating with individual employees while serving on the board at the beginning of their service. For example, one member commented on meeting with librarians regarding book bans, while another commented on meeting with members of the teachers’ union to discuss personal topics during their campaigns. One member commented on getting phone calls from parents regarding individual students’ conduct and questioning the administration about the procedure. If motivation for members is highly personal before becoming a member, the data suggests that
their behavior and motivation for serving are less likely to have propensities of governance while being active on the board.

To answer the question of how motivations of school board members align with research on effective governance and motivation, we also have to consider some different forms of altruism and how this may look different currently than in prior research studies. For example, Wang et al. (2020) focused on the moralization of public service and five innate moralities. During the pandemic care, fairness, authority, loyalty, and sanctity were being challenged consistently in people’s lives. The data suggests that altruism was reflected in the motivations of my participants during the pandemic in ways that were different from Perry’s (1996) definition of altruism. Whereas Perry defined altruism in terms of public service, participants in my study focused on their suffering, or the suffering of others, which motivated them to become involved in their school district. The suffering described in the data included members’ personal freedoms being stripped away or a lack of compassion toward them and their families, causing future members to speak up and become elected based on their character, personality, and social ties to the community as Garn & Copeland (2014) explain, rather than being elected on Perry’s (1996) public service motivation construct involving altruism.

The data also suggests that members’ managerial style of behavior is not due to a lack of training or being unaware of the benefits of governance, but because they are personally motivated by specific personal issues. That managerial style of motivation does change into a governance style as they take their required training and begin to serve on the board; however, a realization of the importance of the role does begin to occur. A superintendent who fails to understand these managerial propensities will find that a board member’s perspective will include having power over the superintendent causing adversarial relationships to emerge and
ineffective governance propensities to become more prevalent. Superintendents who exercise a prosocial, transformational, and supportive style of leadership with board members who are serving for more personal reasons will be more likely to find success and will find that they may be able to help members learn to share power with the superintendent. Superintendents who can separate board members’ propensities and highlight those propensities that better align with governance models should have better chances of success.

**Perception and Motivations**

Finally, when considering how board members perceive the superintendent and their relationship with the superintendent, the data suggests that board members who were motivated by personal reasons for service also had positive reviews for their current superintendents and generally viewed them as effective leaders. This was inferred from a question to interviewees to describe their ideal superintendent. Several of them described traits they need to see with many of them naming their current superintendent by name. It was also evident that differences in policy or personal issues did not affect the superintendent/board relationship, with members speaking mostly positively of their leaders after previously stating some policy differences they may have. If members perceive the superintendent to be an effective leader and trust them, members are more likely to align their motivations as a board member to the goals of the district and the superintendent’s recommendations. This finding aligns very closely with Davidson and Hughes (2019) research on trust.

In order to build trust, the data suggests that superintendents need to be engaged in or constitute forward motion, be transparent, and display moral empathy. In one case, the superintendent either lost trust, did not build trust, or outside actors encouraged noncompliance
as described by Goldstein and Wiedemann (2020) during the pandemic causing trust to become problematic. This breakdown in trust resulted in one member becoming frustrated and motivated to serve for personal reasons. The data suggests that the majority of members’ superintendents have built positive relationships and trust within their districts that allowed them to face adversity during the pandemic and afterward. Superintendents can influence the public and the personal motivations of members by following the advice of Bridges et al. (2019) and Hoxha (2015). To increase board effectiveness, public confidence, and expectations for effective democratic governance, superintendents must build trust with their boards through collaboration, board training, and transparency and strive to become transformational leaders by developing a feeling of trust, loyalty, and respect with each of their board members.

Members’ perception of their role as a board member appears to be multifaceted. Members appear to be aware of the foundational principles of effective governance defined by IASB (2023) and mention certain aspects of the principles in their answers, such as the importance of “following the chain of command.” However, we could also infer the importance of district leadership being visible and active in the community and the importance that the superintendent shares the same values and norms as members of the community do. If the motivation, perception, and will of the community differs from that of the superintendent, then board members’ motivation and their influences for running may change in order to change the recommendations of the superintendent and voting record of the board. For example, in one district the perception of the community was that the superintendent and the board was not putting the needs of the children before the policies enacted by the state. This motivated a member to run for personal reasons in order to influence policies that they viewed were disadvantageous and were hurting their children. The personal motivation for running and
serving on the school board will then have different implications for the style of leadership from the superintendent and style of school board governance than it would if someone were to run for an altruistic reason alone, as the superintendent would have members’ personal motivations to consider.

Perceptions are important and can alter the motivation of a community member or board member. As noted in the literature review, research (Sivarat et al., 2021) along with a number of meta-analyses (Hoch et al., 2018; Peng et al., 2021) has shown that transformational leadership can positively influence a wide variety of performance outcomes for individuals, groups, and organizations that use the transformational leadership framework. If transformational leadership elements are present in superintendents, the perception and motivation for board members may change. Oftentimes transformational leadership qualities can be used in a proactive way to prevent conflicts and minimize potential damages as described by Wargo et al. (2022a). This approach would not only have positive results for current board members, but may also communicate a superintendent’s reasoning and decision-making process for those in the community who may have concerns. Peterson and Short (2002) describe ways for superintendents to clarify board members’ motivations in a productive way, which may encourage board members to transcend their personal motivations and transcend those interests for the sake of the district. For example, a board member who has personal motivations regarding taxes or the wages of employees may be part of an upcoming negotiation process or asked to form a committee to gain input on tax rates as compared to neighboring districts. The knowledge gained through the process may help in transforming their motivations and perceptions during their tenure as a board member (Avolio & Bass, 1995).
Influences for Running

Many of the influences for running were consistent with a highly politicized climate due to the pandemic as well as political controversies that were mentioned in the mainstream media as referenced in the literature review by Malkus et al. (2020) and others. In the shadow of the pandemic and increased mandates, superintendents have been under more pressure to be inclusive to all students. This has affected board/superintendent relationships and has also activated additional motivational responses to be recognized. Interviewees did not mention topics such as achievement scores, extracurricular activities, differences in coaching philosophies, or disagreement with school employees in the interview data as personal motivations or influences for them running for the school board. Also absent in the data were responses regarding civic duty or community pride, which are qualities found in public service motivation research. Many of the influences for members interviewed can be characterized as policy differences that originated at the state or county level which affected them on a personal level as opposed to an individual or person at the school that they had a disagreement with or the need for prestige and power as suggested by Lee and Eadens (2014) and Mountford (2004).

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has limitations. The primary goal of this study was to understand school board members’ motivations for running for the school board. Recent events have influenced people to become motivated to run for the school board with the notion that people were becoming more involved for personal reasons, which, in turn, negatively affected school board governance. Future research directions may be able to link motivation’s effect on school board governance to
student achievement. Another future direction may also include researching board members’ use of moral empathy and its effect on governance.

This study consisted of five board members from different schools who were newly elected to their respective school boards. The schools they represented were of different size and geographical location, but were within a 50-mile radius of each other. Future studies could benefit from an increased sample size and a larger geographical radius representation. The sample size was diverse given its small size; however, a more diverse sample representative of the state’s demographics may also be beneficial for future studies.

Conclusion

The research findings suggest that effective leadership is crucial during times of conflict and hardship. The study indicates that the qualities of transformational leadership play a vital role in preventing adversarial conflicts and promoting good governance within a community and a school board. Moreover, the motivations of board members for running for the school board are complex and can be affected by their perceptions of their environment and community. Therefore, school superintendents need to understand that if they are perceived as progressive, transparent, honest, and trustworthy they will be more successful in communicating policy changes or mandates to their community than those who lack these qualities. Additionally, superintendents who exhibit a transformational style of leadership, including moral empathy, will be better suited to promote good governance and prevent managerial-type behaviors.

To be an effective leader, superintendents must understand what motivates board members. Building good relationships with them is essential for the success of the school district. Motivation is a crucial factor that impacts the operations of the board and the community. If
superintendents understand a school board member’s motivation for running, then they might better anticipate how that board member is going to approach their role on the school board. School districts invest a significant amount of time and money in their districts, and it is equally important for them to invest time in understanding what motivates the people responsible for creating policies and making decisions for their districts. Paper 3 will introduce the importance of this concept and a tool that can be used to help discover board members’ motivations so that superintendents can better predict how members will behave and vote once they become a member of the school board.
References


Subject Line: School Board Member Motivation Research Opportunity

Hi,

Thank you for taking the time to consider helping me with my research. I am a doctoral student at Northern Illinois University and hope to graduate in the Spring of 2024. I have been a Principal at Le-Win CUSD #202 for the past 13 years. I serve on the board of directors for ILASCD and am currently a board member of Erin Township. Governance boards greatly influence my day-to-day experiences.

Because of this, I am inspired to analyze and reflect on newly elected school board members in my post-graduate work. I have been working on a new qualitative research study and I need your help. My goal for this study is to research newly elected school board members’ motivations and determine if people’s motivations for running for the school board have changed in the past few years. The resulting information will help better understand the role motivation plays in the governance of effective school boards. It will also assist the superintendent/board relationship by allowing superintendents to better understand board members’ motivations and how board members perceive their purpose for serving the school board.

This information will be necessary for newly hired superintendents as they get to know their board members and for existing superintendents who have newly elected members. Understanding the motivational trends or direction of board members over time is also impactful for the superintendent/board relationship. Understanding and accounting for board members’ motivation for service will directly correlate with the superintendents’ leadership style as they manage their district.

Why You Should Participate:
- The experience will help illuminate the board member’s role.
- To gain a better understanding of the board/superintendent board relationship.
- Sharing your unique experience for the betterment of education.
- You will be helping to advance educational research.

Who Can Participate?
- Newly elected school board members

If you fit these requirements and are interested in helping, sign up for the study by clicking the link here.
Please let me know if you have any questions I can answer. Thank you for helping to improve public education.

Best,
Andrew Lobdell - Northern Illinois University Doctoral Student
Principal - Junior High School
"Building Foundations for Lifelong Learning"
IL ASCD Board Member / IPA Member / AIRSS

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Appendix B

Interview Protocol/Script

To gain a better understanding of why people run for their local school board, their motivations for serving on the board, and their perspective of their superintendents, questions adapted from Mountford’s (2004) study, Perry and Wise’s (1990) work on public service motivation, and Bass’s (1985) behavioral dimensions of transformational leadership will be used. Using a “grand tour” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006) approach, participants will be asked to tell their stories on what motivated them to become school board members. To start, a grand tour question will be used. For example, “I’d like to hear you talk about becoming a school board member, from the beginning if you like.”

These questions will be used as probes to determine whether board members were motivated to serve for personal, altruistic, or other/neutral reasons. Probes used for the “grand tour” questions include:

1. What motivated you to serve on the school board?
2. Were there any specific issues going on in the district that motivated you?
3. Were there people that influenced you or asked you to get involved?
4. Are there any events in the past 2-3 years that will influence your approach to school board governance?

Further probes will be used based on the participant’s responses to the “grand tour” questions. These questions will be used to further determine whether board members’ motivations were personal, altruistic, or other. These probes will also be used to help determine the style of governance board members exhibit:
1. When it comes to good leadership, how do you think a good leader should manage power? Do you think power should be shared, centralized, no questions asked, etc.? Tell me about a time when you felt like you were in a power struggle.
2. Share with me your decision-making process. What does it look like?
3. How would you describe your communication style? Direct/indirect? How often do you communicate school matters outside of board meetings?
4. What does a good manager look like to you? What do you think a well-managed school district looks like?
5. What role do you think a school board member should play when it comes to governing a school district?

Other questions will be posed to gain a better understanding of the relationship each board member has with his or her respective superintendent in terms of power and control and the board/superintendent relationship. These questions will also help to answer the question regarding how board members perceive the board/superintendent relationship and how that relationship aligns with their motivations for serving:

1. What does a good public servant look like to you?
2. Describe your ideal superintendent.
3. What leadership style do you hope to see from the superintendent? What are your expectations for how the superintendent will communicate with the school board?
DISCOVERING SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS’ MOTIVATIONS

Guidance for the Superintendent: Transforming Motivations into Effective Governance

During the pandemic, when school districts were forced to make difficult decisions regarding learning, I was motivated to research the reasons why school board members chose to become public servants during such challenging times. As a school principal and former board member, I have observed board meetings, public comments, and researched school boards in the past. However, my current observations and experiences with school boards did not match my previous findings, which led me to consider how new and current superintendents can better understand the motivations of incoming board members. I also reflected on how onboarding practices could be improved to include discussions on board members’ motivations and how their behaviors may impact governance procedures, goals, and the board-superintendent relationship.

Superintendents need to develop good relationships with school board members to ensure effective governance. This can be achieved by understanding what motivates board members to serve on their local school boards and taking the time to learn about their motivations. Motivation plays a crucial role in board operations, so it is important to understand what drives members to run and serve. This is particularly important during times of highly politicized environments, changes in superintendent, or when a board has new members who are getting to know each other. Effective governance is essential for schools to operate efficiently and for
students to achieve their full potential. When board motivations are not aligned with effective strategies, districts can become counterproductive. Therefore, superintendents need to be aware of and capable of transforming board motivations so that superintendents and board members can use effective governance principles. The first step in this process is to develop board members to become productive members of the governance team.

**Developing an Effective Member**

School boards are allowed to change their membership every two years. This means that the group dynamics of the board are likely to change, resulting in some level of restructuring. Superintendents should be aware that the transition from campaign to board member can be challenging and demanding for new members. New members may have campaigned on a single issue or in highly politicized environments. One of the first steps in the onboarding process for a superintendent and newly elected board member is helping them transition from their campaign agenda to becoming a productive governing member of the school board. Superintendents need to acknowledge members’ campaigns and assist them in the transition process with the board, especially in the early stages of board/superintendent relations. There are various ways that school districts go about this transition with new members.

Superintendents have a responsibility to ensure that school boards take ownership of their policies by providing proper training to their members and fostering a positive culture. Illinois law mandates new members to undergo training sessions once they are elected. Additionally, professional organizations such as IASB often help board members gain more knowledge in their field. Superintendents should encourage their members to participate in such organizations and promote professional development based on the district’s needs. For example, new members
should know the difference between management and governance. A common analogy used for board members is that they should stay on the balcony and not be involved in the management. Governance takes place on the balcony, whereas management is on the dance floor. Superintendents should not assume that new board members understand these governing norms and should instead provide resources and promote professional development to ensure that the board’s focus is where it should be.

The First 100 Days

During the first 100 days of their term, new board members typically undergo training on various principles for effective governance. By law, all public-school board members are required to complete mandatory training (IASB, 2024). Additionally, some districts provide board member orientation, which may include a review of district board policies, board member handbooks, previous board meeting minutes, and informal conversations and meetings that explain members’ roles and responsibilities for effective governance (IASB, 2022).

One theoretical framework for effective governance in schools is the IASB’s (2023) *Foundational Principles of Effective Governance*, along with their chart of board-superintendent roles. Other organizations, such as the Center for Public Education (Dervarics & O’Brien, 2019), use their eight characteristics of an effective school board to develop board members into effective governing members.

The transition to becoming an effective board member is often overlooked and difficult for new members, causing governance to stall. Emphasizing school board members’ motivations during these early processes will help in future board governance procedures and allow boards to become more effective for the communities they serve (Delagardelle, 2008).
A shared objective among board members and superintendents is that both current and new members grasp, learn, and apply effective governance principles. It might seem that it is the superintendent’s responsibility to teach these principles to new board members. However, the board president, especially, is accountable for introducing the new member to the board. The orientation process may also involve the superintendent and the board president. During these initial steps, the superintendent needs to establish a connection with the new member and begin to gain an understanding of their characteristics (Alsbury, 2023).

The onboarding process should take place within the first few weeks after the new member is sworn in. This is a critical time for districts and new members, and it is a time when many boards struggle to properly onboard a new member. During this brief period, it is crucial for existing boards and their members to start building relationships. Allocating time or scheduling meetings for boards to get together and discuss each other’s motivations, goals, priorities, and talents and establish connections as a group is crucial in the relationship-building process. During this period, the superintendent must build trust, deepen relationships, and assist members in expressing their feelings, needs, and desires. By doing so, everyone will become better organized and get to know each other on a more personal level. An effective onboarding process for new members can help expedite the board through potential stages of future disorganization and enable the board to enter a phase of performance and effectiveness.
Organizational Theory: Getting to Know Each Other

Within the first two weeks of a new member taking the oath of office and being seated, there is often a formal and informal reorganization of the school board. Superintendents need to understand organizational theory and how individual board members’ motivations may change with the reorganization of the board. It is also important for the board to be educated on the different stages that are involved in a reorganization and some potential pitfalls that may occur.

There are various theories and formats available for group development that can help superintendents and school boards achieve their goals. One such theory is Bruce Tuckman’s organizational theory (Patterson, 2022; Tuckman, 1965), which can serve as a helpful reference for school boards. This theory emphasizes interpersonal relationships and task activity. As per Tuckman’s theory, during the second stage, interpersonal conflicts may arise between members. Thus, superintendents who can understand members’ motivations may reduce the time spent at this stage. Moreover, an effective board member onboarding process is crucial to minimizing and preventing interpersonal conflicts. Leadership, power, and structural issues are dominant at this stage. Therefore, superintendents should assign tasks and develop tools for members to become effective during this stage. Once they become an effective and goal-oriented team, they can move on to becoming a cohesive group.

New board members are often eager to begin as voting members of the board and are often motivated to move their agenda forward after the completion of their campaign and being seated. Because of this, new members often encounter turbulence due to operating as a team or governance group versus as an individual. When it comes to governance and the relationship between the board and superintendent, less time in this stage is better because it involves
behaviors and qualities of ineffective boards, which may allow members’ personal motivations to infiltrate the group.

Superintendents who implement an effective onboarding process can educate both themselves and the board members about their interpersonal conflicts and motivations for serving. This not only helps in organizing tasks among members and governance practices, but also limits leadership, power, and structural issues at the board level. Discussing the motivations of both new and current board members during the onboarding process is essential in reducing the amount of time spent on managing tasks and allows for effective governance and peak performance of the school board.

It is less likely that associations or onboarding processes will provide professional development to help understand the motivations and behavior of members toward school and community issues. During the onboarding process, members learn the expectations of their new role through professional development resources and informal communication with superintendents and board presidents. Since board members play a highly visible and social role, superintendents should focus on building trust, deepening relationships, and making new board members feel safe during this transition. This can be achieved by allowing new members to express their needs, wants, and motivations to the board president with or without the superintendent in a small group setting.

Superintendents should have a clear understanding of the motivations of the members they meet for the first time. To comprehend the motivations of a community or a school board, superintendents need to be able to define the culture of the community and the board. Superintendents should start by understanding board members as individuals and then extend their approach to the board as a whole. If superintendents want to identify the differences
between board members’ motivations, they need to develop tools and approaches to understand their motivations during the initial stages of the reorganization process.

**Using Story Circles to Discover Motivation**

Many school districts provide various training tools to aid in the professional development of new school board members. These tools or policies may include formal training, mentorship or coaching, simulation training, online learning, and book studies. However, these tools may not help in discovering a member’s motivation. To gain a deeper understanding of board members, superintendents can use story circles (Deardorff, 2020). Story circles are useful tools for groups such as school boards. Deardorff explains that story circles were designed as a practical intercultural tool to develop and practice intercultural competencies and involve the sharing of personal experiences within gatherings of three or more people (p. 17). In addition, they can be used with different groups of people outside of formal instructional settings using little to no resources and can be facilitated by those who do not need a strong background in intercultural knowledge and theory (p. 13). The sharing of personal experiences through prompts helps validate the perspectives of board members and generates new understandings and perspectives of the group. In the case of board members, the sharing of personal experiences would allow others in the group to gain a more in-depth perspective of others’ motivations for serving on the board.

Superintendents need to appreciate the life experiences of board members who share their stories of joy, pain, struggle, and triumph. Board members should be able to choose how much they want to share during meetings. For instance, they may share personal motivations with higher intensity in a meeting with the superintendent and board president, but share to a lesser
degree when they are with other members of the school board. Superintendents can benefit from using story circles as a tool to understand board members’ motivations on emotional, mental, spiritual, or physical levels, and build relationships between the board members.

Having an effective board is crucial for a community and a superintendent. Superintendents who follow the circle format to understand board members’ motivations are more likely to govern effectively. This format fosters equity, focus, connection, and inclusion between all participants. Having the knowledge and data to transform board member motivations over time will aid in the board’s success and improve the overall health of the board. This can be achieved by demonstrating respect for others, developing moral empathy and listening skills, and building relationships with board members who come from different cultural backgrounds. Demonstrating and practicing these qualities is crucial for student achievement and the overall health of a district.

Utilizing Board Circles to Discover Motivation

Superintendents and board members need a way to understand board members’ motivations and gain a sense of their unique perspectives to ensure effective governance. Deardorff (2020), in her *Manual for Developing Intercultural Competencies*, developed a methodology called story circles. Parks (2023) used story circles with pre-service teachers to explore and analyze others’ experiences through participant stories to gather narrative data. Based on my research, the story circle methodology was identified and adapted to help superintendents better understand school board members’ motivations for running and serving on their local school boards.
Story circles have been adapted in many ways. The adaptation depends on the content and purpose of the environment. Recently, story circles have been used to increase the amount of social emotional learning that occurs in classrooms. Circles can also be used to help better connect a community to school. Lenertz (2018) described these circles as community education circles. Restorative justice circles (Lodi, et. al, 2021) have also been used to build and strengthen relationships, increase accountability and heal harms that have occurred through mediation and conflict resolution programs. Teachers may employ circles as a means of familiarizing themselves with their class at the start of the year, while others may use them to establish trust and encourage equity in the classroom. For example, Venegas (2018) used literature circles for struggling and reluctant readers to strengthen their self-efficacies.

A useful tool adapted from story circles that superintendents can utilize to develop individual’s intercultural competencies or motivations is what I’ll call “board circles.” The basic concept remains the same with board circles. A board circle is designed to bring together all members, their unique perspectives, and motivations for serving their community. It also aims to gain a better understanding of members’ expectations of others, their knowledge of governance, their cultural contexts that influence education, and their daily realities that may affect how they conceive learning.

**Utilizing Board Circles While Onboarding**

When introducing a new board member to the board, it is common practice to have the superintendent join the introductory meeting between the board president and the new member and essential for the meeting to be considered an onboarding circle. During this meeting, the group of three can use the “circle” tool to initiate conversation and begin building a relationship
between members. The superintendent or board president would lead this group meeting and ask questions of varying levels of risk, moving from low to medium, and then to high. Additionally, questions could and should be categorized into topics that are unique to each district.

A low-risk category would include questions that allow individuals to get acquainted with each other. These questions should build trust and rapport between the members of the group. For example, low-risk questions may ask: What makes you laugh? Which season of the year is your favorite? or What subject in school was your favorite? Medium-risk questions may ask questions like: What gives you hope? What is your best quality? or What inspires you? Medium-risk questions should allow the individuals to share more personal information with the group and should include more emotional risk than the low-risk questions. High-risk questions should not be used until members have developed a sense of safety and trust with each other. High-risk questions may trigger emotional trauma in individuals and should only be used if members feel comfortable. Answers from this category may involve personal stories, taking responsibility, community topics, school topics, relationships, values, etc. High-risk questions may ask questions like: Describe an experience or feeling of when you did not fit in. What is one thing you would change about the district? What impact do you want to leave on the district? and What are you most passionate about?

It is also possible that the onboarding process may not involve the superintendent, or it could happen alongside or in addition to a meeting with the superintendent. The use of this tool could be advantageous for board presidents when creating objectives for the board as a whole, goals for the superintendent, or in discovering members’ motivations concerning the superintendent or the district.
Utilizing Board Circles During Self-Evaluations

Board circles can be highly beneficial in a formal setting, such as a board self-evaluation, and can also be used during professional development sessions to onboard a new member. Board self-evaluation typically involves the entire board and the superintendent and may include a representative of a statewide association of which the public body is a member. It often occurs in a closed-session environment. The board should discuss important motivations during self-evaluation during a transition and in the onboarding of new members. Discovering board members’ motivations during this formal setting could be very powerful in setting goals and having a highly effective board.

During the self-evaluation process, the board may become aware of topics they have not considered before. These topics could be of interest to individual board members or the superintendent and may require additional training for the board as a whole or for individual members. Additional training may also be considered for the superintendent or the district.

Overview of Board Circle Questioning

To begin the process of building relationships and selecting who to involve in board circle training, there are some tips that superintendents or board presidents should keep in mind. It is crucial to have a goal or basic understanding of what board circles are and a goal for each board circle. Group norms and behaviors should be established before starting the board circle. Participants should be enthusiastic and positive, providing regular feedback that can be both verbal and nonverbal. Ideally, participants should stand or sit in a circle without any obstacles blocking their view. Everyone in the circle should participate, with the option for participants to
pass the question on to the next member if they are not ready to answer when it is their turn. The types of questions asked should be tailored to the needs and goals of the district or the participants involved. For instance, if a participant ran unopposed on a single issue regarding finance, questions should be tailored to address those motivations. When meeting in a self-evaluation environment, the superintendent or board president may wish to create questions that involve effective governance content or strategic plan goals that are unique to their district. Questions should be leveled and contain some risk. Below are some examples of board circle questions that can be useful in discovering members’ motivations and developing relationships.

**Utilizing Leveled Questions in Board Circles: Low Risk**

- What makes you laugh…
- Which season of the year is your favorite…
- Which subject in school was your favorite…
- What is your favorite animal…
- What is your favorite time of day…
- What is your favorite place to eat…
- What did you want to be as a kid…
- Describe your ideal vacation spot…
- If you were a private investigator, what would you investigate…
- What is the craziest thing you have done…
- What is a special skill or talent that you have…

**Utilizing Leveled Questions in Board Circles: Medium Risk**

- Describe the neighborhood you grew up in…
- What is your favorite thing about your community…
- Who was a teacher that influenced you in a positive/negative way…
- What is something you do that bothers others…
- What inspires you…
- How do you define power…
- What does governance mean to you…
- What does trust mean to you…
- What leadership style do you prefer…
Describe your ideal leader…
What change would you like to see in your community…
What is the most important quality when you are in a relationship with someone else…

Utilizing Leveled Questions in Board Circles: High Risk

- How do you perceive the school district…
- What motivated you to serve on the school board…
- What specific issues motivated you to want to serve on the school board…
- What influences you the most daily…
- What does a good superintendent look like to you…
- What role should a board member have…
- What does a good public servant look like to you…
- Describe your ideal school leader/superintendent…
- Describe a time that you lost control…
- Which morals are you most passionate about…
- What are your most important values…
- Describe a time when you conflicted with someone close to you…
- What impact do you want to leave on the district…
- What do you want your legacy to be…
- What has life taught you recently about empathy…
- Describe what justice means to you…

Motivations from Study Findings

Table 3.1 shows the themes that were developed to summarize research findings on motivation. Themes were developed using open codes generated from interview questions.
Table 3.1

Themes Developed from Research Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Answers: Theme Buckets</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
<th>Interview Answers (open codes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Motivation</td>
<td>1. What motivated you to serve on the school board?</td>
<td>Tax dollars, Reduce taxes, School success, Library books, Continuous improvement, Disappointment in administration, COVID mandates, Transgender issues, Accountability, Threats financially, Feeling of helplessness, Very personal, I don’t trust anybody, Community pride, Approached, Good candidate, Interested to learn, Viable, Book challenges, Culture wars, LGBTQ+ issues, Diversity, Extremist candidates, Personal agendas, Equity concerns, Queer issues, Prejudices, Taxes, Stress, Strain, Fixed incomes, Voice of community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociocultural Influences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family, Mandates, Trust, Accountability, Stress, Community Status, Feelings, Bullying, Community Voice, Pride, Diversity, Equity, Prejudice, Religion, Books, Gender, Masks</td>
<td>2. Were there any specific issues going on in the district that motivated you?</td>
<td>COVID, Transgender issues, Book policies, Equity failures, Socioeconomic issues, Equity circumstances, Compensation, Recognition, Prejudices, Employee Pay, Bullying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Influences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coalition, Candidate Positioning, Policy, Mandates</td>
<td>3. Were there people that influenced you or asked you to get involved?</td>
<td>Family, Other parents, Other board members, Librarians, Teachers, Union members, Superintendent, God, Teacher Union, Democratic Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Influences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Socioeconomic, Taxes, Compensation</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Altruistic Motivations</td>
<td>Additional answers from additional interview questions related to motivation.</td>
<td>Part of community, Unethical behavior of administration, Poor communication, Lack of transparency, Lack of accountability, Lack of representation, Kids in school, Community pride</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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Final Thoughts

Superintendents may encounter challenges when it comes to engaging a board member who is unwilling to participate. In such cases, board circles can prove to be a valuable tool in improving the relationship between board members and the superintendent and promoting effective governance. Clear communication and healthy relationships are essential for effective governance while understanding each other’s motivations for serving the public. To promote better engagement and relationships at the board level, superintendents should encourage the integration of board circles into local and state policies. Incorporating board circles as part of a district’s local policy underscores the importance of building relationships and motivates members to consider, not only their motivations for serving but also the motivations of other members. It is recommended that local school boards come together and participate in board circles to build relationships, enhance student achievement, and promote effective governance.
References


