

# School Board Governance: Toward Healthy & Humanizing Schools

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## Introduction

When the school board in Tucson, Arizona voted to eliminate its successful Mexican American Studies program in 2012, hundreds of students lost access to curriculum that improved their academic success, cultural knowledge, and engagement in learning (Cabrera, 2014). This vote, influenced by state law, demonstrates the impact of local governing authorities on educational equity. Although school boards are often trained to "stay in their lane" and to sometimes even simply rubber stamp the policies and practices put forth by district, state, or federal leaders, school boards have the power to make critical decisions that have the potential to impact millions of students, families, and educators.

In this brief, I offer a summary from my book, *Navigating School Board Politics: A Framework for Advancing Equity*, which presents guidance on how local school board members can harness their governing power to do the work of advancing educational equity in their districts (Sampson, 2024). This research emerges from nearly a decade of research on how school boards in the United States either perpetuate or disrupt educational inequities.

Many school boards have inherited a legacy of injustices instituted by their predecessors and others, which are deeply embedded in our school systems. I began the book by describing some of these injustices in a brief but important political history of public schools while making explicit connections to school boards. For instance, I describe how some school boards pushed back against school desegregation after *Brown v. Board of Education*. I also explain how education reforms to increase standards and high-stakes accountability have unfolded to advance the movement to dismantle public education *post-Brown v. Board of Education*. This history shows how the broader context can influence the work of school boards, but also how these governing bodies can navigate their contexts in ways that contribute to advancing or hindering educational equity. The framework I present following this political history offers tools to guide school boards in the latter path.

## School Board Governance for Equity (SBGE)

The core of the book is the School Board Governance for Equity (SBGE) framework. SBGE is a guide for prospective and current school board members to enact their agency in ways that can move equity forward in their school districts. Those who engage with school boards, including district leaders, other policymakers, educators, families, and local communities, can also employ this framework to support the work of school board governance toward educational equity. The framework consists of four interconnected principles: Knowledge, Understanding, Skills, and Strategies.




## Knowledge: Critical Consciousness

The SBGE principle of Knowledge urges prospective and current school board members to identify and understand who they are in this work. This principle is about building a critical consciousness related to identity, experiences, and beliefs that shape their individual and collective governance. Below are some of the key components:

- **Examine their positionality:** Reflect on both their social identities (i.e., race, class, gender, language background) and life experiences, and how their positionality influences their perspectives and decisions related to education.
- **Identify their relationship to the community:** Understand one's relationship to the communities they are serving, particularly historically marginalized groups within the district.
- **Identify beliefs and social constructions:** Identify and question their deep-seated beliefs and how they socially construct the various communities they represent, including youth, families, educators, and residents.

For example, a Black mother of school-aged children, a White female retired teacher, and a young person who was raised in the same community each operate with a different lens, which shapes how they define healthy schools, educational success, and educational equity. It is through these varying lenses that board members will ask critical questions, provide specific input, and make significant decisions. This self-work is not a one-time exercise but an ongoing practice that informs every aspect of governance.

## Understanding: Deep Contextual Knowledge

The SBGE principle of Understanding asks prospective/current board members to engage in deep learning about the district and the community, including the socio-political history of that community. This principle requires some research and connecting with key players at each level of the district (administration, school leaders, teachers, staff, families, and community leaders), along with current, past, and potential future school board members.

- **Socio-political history:** Researching how historical policies, legal cases, and demographic shifts have shaped the educational opportunities offered in different neighborhoods within the district beyond the particular neighborhood that any one board member resides in and is most familiar with.
- **Mapping dynamics and players:** Identifying and making connections to formal and informal power dynamics and players that influence the district community.
- **Asset-based community knowledge:** Recognizing, leveraging, and building on the strengths and resources within the district community in ways that advance equity.

This principle in action might involve a board member studying how past district boundary decisions or past school desegregation cases contributed to racial and socioeconomic disparities. This also might involve learning how community-based organizations have enhanced

equitable educational opportunities outside of schools. A deep contextual understanding can help school boards avoid implementing "solutions" that repeat historical patterns of injustice and instead identify the root causes of problems that they can work to remedy.

## Skills: Coalition Politics and Multi-level Policy Navigation

The SBGE principle of Skills focuses on developing two skills among prospective/current board members:

- **Coalition building and coalition politics:** Creating and nurturing alliances across diverse community groups to advance equity-focused work, particularly when facing resistance.
- **Leveraging state and federal politics:** Developing strategies to navigate and leverage supportive state or federal policies while mitigating harmful ones.

Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman elected to Congress and first Black presidential candidate, provided a powerful model on coalition politics that is useful here. In her 1972 article, entitled "The Politics of Coalition," she highlighted that Black women who engaged in coalition politics were "involved in both black and women's liberation." Chisholm urged marginalized groups to "unite and challenge the forces which now hold the power in our country." For school boards, this, for instance, might mean creating alliances between Black and Latinx parent groups to advocate for dual-language programs that benefit multiple communities. The second area dealing with state and federal politics explains how board members can engage in leveraging, resisting, and supporting state and federal policymakers, policies, and regulations that influence educational equity. School boards operate under state authority, and to a lesser extent, under federal authority. Understanding how to navigate these other levels of government in ways that protect equity and public education while considering legal constraints is critical.

## Strategies: Responsive Action and Imagination

The SBGE principle of Strategies emphasizes the need for two approaches that prospective/current board members can employ:

- **Proactive responsiveness:** Developing systems to anticipate and address inequities before they escalate, rather than reacting to crises.
- **Imagining the possibilities:** Creating space to envision educational possibilities beyond current constraints.

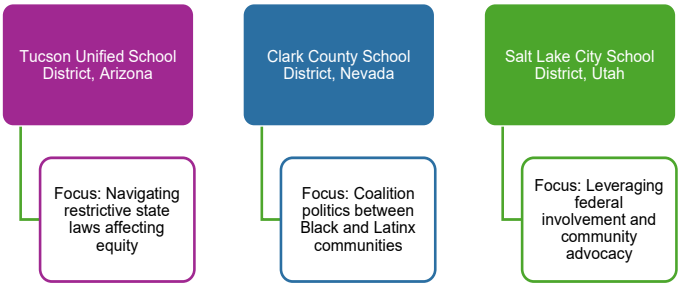
Being proactively responsive is about preparing for when, not if, inequities rise to the school board level. Since inequities are deeply embedded in our educational systems, school boards need to be prepared to respond, which requires deep listening, flexibility, patience, and humility. In practice, proactive responsiveness might involve establishing regular equity audits of discipline data to identify disparities before they become entrenched patterns or developing a policy that provides guidance on how to address racist incidents that are likely to arise in the district. The second strategy, imagining the possibilities, is reflected in a quote from Robin Kelly's book *Freedom Dreams* that reminds us, "Love and imagination may be the most revolutionary impulses available to us, and yet we have failed to understand their political importance and respect them as powerful social forces." This work might include community visioning sessions that center the dreams and aspirations of students and families who have been historically marginalized, using these visions to guide strategic planning that builds and supports humanizing schools rather than defaulting to standardized test scores as the primary measure of success.

These four SBGE principles work together as an integrated framework, giving board members both analytical tools and practical strategies to transform governance practices. When implemented thoughtfully, SBGE allows school boards to move beyond performative equity statements to substantive action that creates measurable improvements in educational justice.

## School Board Focused Case Studies

In the three chapters following the SBGE framework, I highlight how the SBGE principles unfolded within three case study examples based on my previous research. In these examples, I focused on how three different school

boards located in three states within the Mountain West Region—Tucson Unified School District (Arizona), Clark County School District (Nevada), and Salt Lake City School District (Utah)—governed related to policies and practices that impacted Emerging Bilinguals (EBs).




- In **Arizona**, school board members grappled with navigating restrictive state laws that supported inequities, including an anti-ethnic studies law that pushed for the dismantling of Mexican American Studies and an English immersion law that required that English learners be pulled out of content classrooms for four hours per day for English immersion. Community advocates, both for and against these state laws, played a large role in shaping the school board governance related to these issues.
- In **Nevada**, school board members and community advocates who pushed the school boards worked to leverage state policy and funding to build programs for EBs while engaging in coalition politics among Latinx and Black communities.
- In **Utah**, school board members, along with community advocates, leveraged federal policies to better serve EBs, were proactively responsive to these policies, and imagined possibilities through a strong and active strategic plan.

## Actionable Recommendations: From Framework to Practice

In a piece I wrote years ago, I said: "For school boards to work, the community literally has to work." (Sampson, 2019). This is especially true when it comes to advancing equity. Based on the SBGE framework and case study findings, I offer the following actionable recommendations for school boards, entities that support school boards, and communities that engage with school boards and who are committed to advancing educational equity:

### For School Boards:

1. **Develop a structured onboarding process** for new board members that explicitly incorporates the SBGE framework, including guided critical consciousness activities (Knowledge), community history research and mapping of dynamics and players (Understanding), coalition-building and political navigation training (Skills), and equity response protocols (Strategies).
2. **Build constituencies** that may have stemmed from school board campaigns (in the cases where voters elected board members). This requires regular communication with individual board members' constituent community, and may include monthly coffee chats, an email listserv, or virtual communication over social media.
3. **Establish governance-community feedback loops and elevate marginalized voices** by creating formal mechanisms for two-way communication between school boards and communities that go beyond traditional public comment periods. This might include advisory committees with equitable representation, digital feedback platforms for communities to submit questions and feedback that the school board reviews and responds to on a regular basis, and rotating community forums.
4. **Create transparency dashboards:** Develop public-facing tools that track school board equity decisions and implementation progress over time.
5. **Institute regular equity audits** that examine policies, practices, structures, inputs, and outcomes across the district. These audits should include clear but fluid and holistic metrics, transparent reporting mechanisms, and scheduled public sessions that democratically engage the community to review progress and adjust strategies.
6. **Develop a "state policy navigation toolkit"** that documents specific strategies for maximizing local authority within restrictive state contexts. Draw from successful examples to provide concrete approaches, such as coalition building and lobbying, for working within—and when necessary, around—state constraints.
7. **Develop a coalition politics toolkit:** Provide school board members with practical resources for building

cross-community coalitions and engaging in coalition politics, including communication templates, conflict resolution strategies, and successful case examples.

8. **Facilitate "imagination workshops"** as part of strategic planning processes. These structured sessions should explicitly center community aspirations and dreams that go beyond traditional metrics, with particular attention to historically marginalized perspectives.

### For Communities:

1. **Form cross-constituency equity coalitions** that bring together diverse partners (parents, educators, community organizations) across racial, linguistic, economic, and geographic lines. These coalitions can provide consistent pressure, support, and accountability for school boards to adopt an equity-focused governance.
2. **Develop board member accountability systems** that track equity-related votes, statements, and actions. Create public dashboards or some other public-facing system that explore board member consistency between stated equity commitments and actual governance decisions.
3. **Establish a community-led policy review process** where community members systematically analyze proposed board policies for equity implications and possible unintended consequences before adoption. This process should produce specific recommendations that boards can incorporate into final policies.
4. **Create a "civic education campaign"** about school board authority and impact. Many community members underestimate board power and influence but educational materials, workshops, and even tools like podcasts can help communities better understand how to effectively engage with and influence board governance.
5. **Build a bench of equity-focused candidates** through targeted recruitment and training programs that prepare and support community members to run for school board positions. Focus particularly on recruiting candidates from historically underrepresented groups and those with strong equity commitments.

## School Boards in this Political Era: A Call to Urgent Action

Our increasingly politically contentious environment in the U.S. is contributing to significant shifts in the education system. We are witnessing the political effects of several decades of efforts to dismantle public education. This includes the increase of universal voucher programs, a wave of school closures, drastic teacher shortages, and the removal of equity work that aimed to build fairer and more just educational systems. Consequently, as these efforts unfold, the public trust in public education will likely diminish. This is by design. As Nelson Mandela famously stated, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." If we believe this to be true, then it is clear why public education is, and has always been, political.

The assault on equitable education carries particularly devastating consequences for marginalized communities. When it comes to Black education, Black communities have fought long and hard for a high-quality public education. Political antics to remove educational opportunities are historically embedded in the educational trajectories of Black communities. From laws that prohibited literacy and laws that allowed for separate and unequal schools to policies and practices that upheld and continue to uphold the school-to-prison nexus, the systematic undermining of educational opportunity has deep roots with urgent implications today. Public education is not perfect, and is too often, not equitable. Yet, we would not fight for something we do not care about, believe in, and know its power, which is why many Black communities, and other marginalized communities, continue to fight for public education in this country. And the democratic project of school boards is a central part of this fight.

Our local school board members who believe in this fight to advance educational equity must leverage their governing power and authority. Communities must fight to support and push school boards to adopt progressive governance. The urgency of this work cannot be overstated. We must fight together to increase public trust and commitment in public education—a public education that includes, serves, and values all our children and their

families. The time for this fight is not forthcoming—it is here, and it is now.

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## About the Author



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### Editorial Disclosure

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