

A Political Scientist Runs for School Board¹

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Mark Twain allegedly said “[i]n the first place, God made idiots. That was for practice. Then he made school boards” (Maeroff 2010). Former US Undersecretary of Education, Chester E. “Checker” Finn, proposed abolishing school boards, with their miserable mix of single issue activists, ambitious politicians, and former employees settling scores (Howell 2005). Midlist works of educational leadership lambast school boards as shortsighted and corrupt. Even Hollywood has piled on (Maranto 2013; Maranto 2016).

I study bureaucracies, particularly schools, and generally support school choice. In the summer of 2015, I ran for and won election to the board overseeing the traditional public schools my children attend—a system serving roughly 9,600 students and spending well over \$100 million annually. I perform unpaid work alongside board colleagues who disagree with me on school choice, among other things. However, they are genuinely decent public servants who, like me, want to improve our traditional public schools. My spouse, who managed my campaign, and I both find it gratifying to shape the institutions shaping our children. I urge others of my tribe—political scientists—to do likewise. Real-world public service improves our teaching and research and might improve public bureaucracies, though change may not come easily.

In theory, public schools are open systems citizens can influence through voiced opinions, voting, running for office, and the courts (Gutmann 1987; Halchin 2001). The real world of public school governance is more complex. Pluralism in state capitols and even in school district offices privileges organized interests over parents (Chubb and Moe 1990; Moe 2011). Local public education leaders, including school board members, may limit information, appeal to community loyalties, intimidate critics, and use highly specialized language to limit and channel citizen influence. Elites have incentives to act thusly to minimize uncertainty, since education can be controversial and citizens can be unpredictable (Cutler 2000; Rousmaniere 2013). This is doubly true of special education, whose very complexity permits manipulation by school officials, and privileged parents, in ways tending to underserve the disadvantaged (Ong-Dean 2009). My experiences suggest that, largely due to non-transparency, democratic theory approaches to influencing public schools hold less explanatory power than do elitist and pluralistic models.

UNDERLYING ISSUES: WHAT DOESN'T MAKE THE NEWS

My wife, April, and I have two kids, one a former special education student, both in traditional public schools. Because we had

a bad experience in our prior state, upon moving to Arkansas we did what privileged parents do—we visited various schools before deciding where to live. Housing markets enable the privileged to escape inadequate service (Egalite and Wolf 2016). Through home buying we chose a public elementary school whose parents were neither too rich nor too poor, with an able principal who knew each child. She promised that our bright, active son would get a teacher who could challenge him. She kept her word.

According to all official communications and most media reports, our local public schools succeeded. Beneath the surface, we found a more complex reality. Informal communication—gossip—plays a key role when many employees distrust formal communications and fear to express opinions openly (Downs 1967; Gaventa 1980). April and I volunteered in schools incessantly and invited successful teachers out for coffee, in part to learn how to navigate the system for our nerdy children. Intellectually oriented students often suffer in traditional public schools, which in many places deemphasize academics.²

Over time, these informal communications gave cause for concern regarding the direction of our local public schools. Disadvantaged students did significantly better in other school districts. Our numbers of National Merit Scholars trended downward. The school board and administration seemingly lacked academic foci. Ending years of stressful conflict over whether to build a second high school, the school board spent \$100 million and countless hours enlarging and upgrading the existing school, enhancing sports and performing arts facilities and increasing the percentage of secondary teachers with athletic coaching responsibilities. Yet teacher pay fell behind, and morale suffered under hierarchical leadership. A teacher of the year—someone we wish our kids had the chance to study under—resigned under pressure. In part, her difficulties came from dissent over a non-rigorous curriculum imposed by an expensive, connected consultant. Regarding connections, informal ties such as church and sorority memberships often influence school personnel and contracting decisions but receive little attention from scholars. We heard about teachers terminated for disloyalty or unprofessionalism, but never for bad teaching. Terry Moe (2011) shows that in many school districts teachers unions make it unduly difficult to terminate teachers. Our own experiences indicate that in weak union settings administrators *can* terminate teachers, but may fire from pique rather than performance. In such locales teachers unions might usefully balance leadership.

THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL: DECIDING TO RUN FOR SCHOOL BOARD

Three incidents sparked my run for school board. First, the school superintendent plagiarized her graduation speech on *authenticity*. A quick google search confirmed that, nationally, school superintendents caught plagiarizing usually escape unscathed. We told a journalist, who said that unless we complained publicly there was no controversy, so no story. Many view public criticism of local public schools as disloyal to the community, partly since bad publicity harms the business climate. In a town with already problematic town-gown relations—no one from the University served on the school board at the time—many would see us as arrogant professors attacking the public schools. As a veteran educator cautioned in a different context, every school district has insiders and outsiders: we might never be insiders, but should avoid becoming outsiders. Given the power of a system leader, public action could harm our kids. As Gaventa (1980) documents

and national school board association meetings, by far most presentations address compliance, finance, board teamwork, legal challenges, buildings, buses, food, and technology—not hiring and retaining great teachers. This reflects history. Since its inception as an outgrowth of Scientific Management, the field of Educational Leadership has viewed certified teachers as interchangeable parts, so this well-meaning individual simply expressed *expertise* (Callahan 1962; Rousmaniere 2013; Maranto et al. 2016b). Later, I ran for board on the slogan “Teachers Matter.”

Some months later, in executive session during her annual performance review, the school superintendent retired to tend to ailing relations (She now leads a school district in a neighboring state). What we did not know at the time was that she had apparently misled the board as to the financial condition of the district. Insiders knew this, but local reporters only heard a year later and never covered the matter. One reason among many why real-world school systems are not

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in a coal town and Williams (2005) shows in public schools, power is often implicit. Nobody told those in the know to do nothing, but nothing they did: so much for transparent democratic processes.

Ultimately, we decided to do something. We had been cultivating school board members for years, volunteering and praising our schools, so we had some credibility. (Building political capital was tough enough for us; imagine the difficulties for disadvantaged parents.) We had coffee, one-on-one, with every school board member willing to meet. We never mentioned plagiarism. I suspect other board members still know nothing about that. Instead, we complained about dumbing down: Common Core did not require vacuity, no matter what the superintendent said. We also confided that we had entered the lottery for the academically oriented local charter school, which had a long waitlist. Soon more such charters would come to town. District schools needed to improve academically, unless they wanted to lose students via the market.

From these and other meetings we divined an inner and outer school board, each dedicated but with different perceptions. The inner board had a deep emotional attachment to our town’s public schools. They saw our schools as great, and believed complaints, especially those from parents who are professors, reflected unrealistic expectations. The outer board shared many of our concerns. Some hinted that while they could say nothing, personnel matters being confidential, soon we might see a new superintendent.

During these meetings came the second precipitating event. An intelligent, dedicated member of the inner board said not to worry about teacher quality since “teachers don’t matter.” At that, I lost my temper. In fairness, this statement reflects the professional ideology of school boards. At state

governed by democratic processes is that nothing important that happens in a public school system makes the papers; thus unsuccessful officials evade accountability. After a failed search for a new superintendent—searches are difficult—the board appointed a retired superintendent to fix the deficit (and keep it out of the papers), open the new high school building to good publicity, keep winning football games, and generally take care of business for a year or two. He seemingly had no academic goals, as is typical of superintendents (Maranto et al. 2016b). The board would soon choose a successor. Given norms of unanimity on superintendent hires, a single determined member could influence the most important decision a school board makes. As Marxist Saul Alinsky (1971) and Republican Richard Haass (1999) respectively argue, a reformer must use any leverage point to push change. Superintendent selection could make quite a lever.

The final impetus to run came when our favorite school board member, a no nonsense banker from our zone, decided against reelection, in part because her kids had graduated. We spent two hours trying to convince her to run, by the end of which she had convinced us to meet with the candidate for her open seat, and consider challenging him. We did so, for nearly three hours. He was a decent, hard-working, likeable businessperson who understood finance and construction—in fact, he had managed the high school reconstruction.³ As an insider, he would have support from local elites, board insiders, and the superintendent. Yet he had no understanding of or interest in academics, and his grandchildren attended private schools. He would reinforce the inner board. For two weeks, we sought advice regarding whether to work with him or challenge him.

We filed in late June, well before deadline, gathering nearly twice the signatures needed out of sheer paranoia. Election Day

was September 15. We ran on two themes: academic quality—teachers matter—and representing parents; with kids in the schools, we have skin in the game. We expected to lose, but running well could promote academic improvement. If we won, as any political scientist knows, upsets get attention.

Arkansas protocol requires telling the superintendent, opponents, and board members of one's candidacy. Everyone knew we wanted change, yet all showed courtesy. An inner board member offered excellent advice, to meet with each member before the election since inflexible sunshine laws forbid private policy discussions among board members, and I might soon be one.

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A LOW TURNOUT ELECTION

The key facts about Arkansas school board elections are that as in many states, they occur on bizarre dates, with no party cues, minimal press coverage, at unpredictable polling locations. One percent turnout is common, and you need at least one vote to win. Sometimes unopposed candidates lose by forgetting to come out to vote for themselves. Arkansas school reformers funded by the Walton Family Foundation are lobbying to move school board elections to party primary election dates while remaining nonpartisan. This would raise turnout and increase attention to academic performance (Howell 2005). Both the state school boards association and the state school administrators association—the professionals—stand in opposition.

To run, we enlisted a political science graduate student who had just helped a pro-LGBT group identify super voters. Two state legislators I had worked with, one Democrat and one Republican, offered advice. Though I am Republican, a Democratic acquaintance—now a friend—helped with cheap

The debate had a surprise: one of the first questions addressed abstinence-only sex education. I had no idea that was an issue, but opined that my kids had sex education three times in two different public schools, all using a “well-rounded approach,” which I supported. My two opponents favored abstinence-only sex education.

attractive, well-timed mailings to super voters. He also introduced me to organization Democrats in our mainly liberal college town, where I discussed schooling and argued “I’m a Republican, but trust me, in this race I’m the Democrat.” April, an actual Democrat, provided additional credibility.

We knocked on the doors of the roughly 700 super voters, leaving flyers and talking with about 200. Being a tenured professor in summer is a huge asset. Other candidates had jobs limiting their time to campaign. We placed

70 signs. We earned endorsements from 17 retired educators, including two popular principals. We did all this with some desperation. Despite my extroverted personality, running for even a minor office is scary. You may make enemies. You may say dumb things. You may muck up financial reports. Losing means public humiliation, not an easy thing for a competitive person.

Despite our efforts, we expected to lose. Our chief opponent was a decent person, respected in the community.⁴ The frontrunner bought into the idea that board members should not seek information so much as support top leadership; indeed, he planted an article in a local publication arguing

for fewer parents on school boards since parents are parochial. The dominant local paper agreed, giving him an editorial endorsement. A political science background led me to a very different place regarding representation and oversight of executives. Interestingly, at least two voters said they voted for me in response to that editorial. They wanted independent board members, and understood that vigilance does not require rudeness. There was a third candidate, a smart, likeable woman from a Fundamentalist church. Over the campaign, I came to respect her and believe that, despite our differences, representation (Pitkin 1967) militated toward having someone like her on the board.⁵

The same weekend the paper endorsed my chief opponent, the local teachers union did likewise, in part since I support charter schools (and competing with charter schools). A friend active in the union said not to worry. They had to endorse my opponent since he was favored to win, but most teachers who voted would vote for me.

A third blow was partly self-inflicted. As Fenno (1977) found, politicians have inner and outer constituencies. I loved working neighborhoods of teachers, professors, and blue-collar folks, but felt less comfortable around wealth. On one upscale porch, I listed platform items, including needing more board members with kids in school. While my critique was right, my numbers were wrong. The homemaker, a sibling of an inner board member with a different last name, rudely kicked me out and sent several hundred

Twitter followers what I consider a misleading account of the interaction. In politics, passions run high.

Access to publicity matters. The chamber of commerce decided against holding a school board debate that year, probably since my chief opponent was a chamber member. We politely contested this decision. After complaints from various quarters, the chamber agreed to hold a debate—on Labor Day Weekend when few would attend and I would be at APSA. They did let me Skype in. The debate had a surprise: one of the first questions addressed abstinence-only sex education. I had no idea that was an issue, but opined that my kids had sex education three times in two different public schools, all using a “well-rounded approach,” which I supported. My two opponents favored abstinence-only sex education. That sent a signal to social liberals. I started getting communications to the effect that even though I was Republican, given the opposition I was in fact the Democrat in the race. In the closing days, a pro-LGBT group began helping. I finally thought we would win a few days before the election, when several people confided that they would vote for me, but could not say so publically. God bless the Australian ballot.

We did all that to win 397 votes; 63% in a three-way race with double the usual turnout, nearly 6%. Some said we bought the election by spending \$3,000, \$2,400 of which was out of pocket. If so, it was a bargain—the price of a chance to change our kids’ schools.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN THE ARENA

When I called my opponents to thank them for running, another Arkansan custom, I noted the fragility of the outcome. With 2% or 12% voter turnout, I might well have lost. Such is the legitimacy of school board elections. Following the Saul Alinsky (1971) school of politics, I did not say that to anyone else; nor mention the sex education issue. While deferential to board members and school leaders, I noted that I ran on academics, and future successful candidates would do likewise. That proved accurate.

Orientation for new Arkansas school board members—run in cooperation with the state association of school administrators—emphasized the importance of teamwork, board unity, and getting information from the “professionals,” the superintendents, to evaluate those self-same superintendents. We should not rely on biased sources like teachers and parents. We had no training regarding academic metrics of school quality. When one speaker said school board members “should not have an agenda,”⁶ Mark Evans, a fellow academic elected to the Dover School Board, retorted “then why did I run for office?” In short, school board “professionalism” recalls public administration circa 1910, differing sharply from how modern political scientists envision democracy and bureaucracy (Maranto 2016; Maranto et al. 2016b; Ostrom 1973).

On my board, as promised, I focus on school climate and academics, to some good effect. Since teachers matter, we now hire teachers earlier, before the supply is picked over. In response to teacher complaints, we tightened absence rules so students will not fall so far behind they can never catch

up. We are improving high school registration so non-elite parents have a more transparent process. (Elites know how to navigate the system.) We are planning to bring back Latin.

On the school board, like other boards, information asymmetries are huge. Board members work a few hours a week, so we know far less than the superintendent we employ; thus, we normally defer to said superintendent. That makes the choice of a superintendent the most important thing we do. Though I cannot discuss personnel deliberations, I can say that my fellow board members and I enthusiastically selected an experienced, competent, collegial, academically-minded new superintendent, now ten months on the job. Nearly every day I talk to parents and educators. Organizational change takes time, but all evidence indicates that the new superintendent is hiring dedicated professionals and making decisions that over the long term will help kids.

Did the election of a political scientist cause that? It didn’t hurt. ■

NOTES

1. Actually, many political scientists have served on school boards, including Marissa Martino Golden, Steve Peterson, Paul Babbitt, and John Portz, who took part in an APSA panel *Political Scientists as Political Actors: The Case of School Boards* (September 5, 2015, San Francisco Hilton).
2. Nationally, about half of male principals are former coaches, so activities often supersede academics (Rousmaniere 2013; Maranto et al. 2016a). Since the National Education Association, then run by administrators, issued the *Cardinal Principals of Secondary Education* in 1918, American public schools have had largely non-academic foci, particularly at secondary levels. Notably, only one of the seven Cardinal Principals addresses largely academic concerns, and none map onto recognized scholarly disciplines (Maranto and McShane 2012). Further, as both Rousmaniere (2013) and Callahan (1962) detail, the development of Educational Leadership as a professional field stressed business acumen, not teaching and learning. Notably, national surveys of school board members and studies of school superintendent contracts suggest that student academic success has little impact on evaluations of superintendents (Maranto et al 2016b).
3. Political competition can make one suspicious. Initially, I suspected this individual ran for board to support construction interests. Over time, I learned that he simply loved doing public service.
4. Parenthetically, certain system insiders snubbed me in interesting ways—after election we became great friends.
5. She came in third and initially took it badly, tweeting that we now had “an ultra ultra liberal anti-Christian” on school board. My family and friends found this hilarious, given prior (accurate) criticisms of me as a Republican, pro-faith professor. When elections hit emotions, even good people can lose themselves.
6. I have heard this in several trainings since.

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