Chapter 10

Missing Opportunity?
Rural School Board Members and Data Use

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ABSTRACT

School board members are elected by their communities to represent the people. Yet studies regarding how board members go about making decisions for their communities are limited. Drawing on policy implementation and sensemaking theories, this study followed a midwestern, rural school board for one year to explore how school board members considered or used data in their decision making. Research questions were: What resources do board members use in making decisions? In particular, how do board members understand the idea of evidence and/or data? Finally, how and when do they use different kinds of evidence and/or data in deciding what is best for students? Findings indicate that the board in this rural district rarely examined data, evidence, or research about students or student achievement. Instead, they sought out and depended upon local experts. They also worked within a system that did not explicitly design opportunities for their sensemaking about student achievement or data. Implications are discussed regarding possibilities for implementing data use by school boards.

INTRODUCTION

Data is a resource, much like water or energy, and like any resource, data does nothing on its own. Rather, it is world-changing in how it is employed in human decision making. – Justin Hienz

Through many iterations of federal law with increasingly tight provisions, one constant in the structure of schooling remains: the majority of oversight and educational policy decisions are made for the community by local entities (Land, 2002). These entities, commonly referred to as school boards (National School Board Association, 2011), can also be referred to as boards of education, school trustees, or school directors. School boards in the United States not only oversee a combined 52 million students, six million

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employees and $600 billion per year (Hess & Meeks, 2010), but they also offer an intimate snapshot of democracy. Just like democracy, the systems of local schools that boards oversee can be fragile, in need of great governance (Reimer, 2015). Among other responsibilities, school boards are tasked with leading the development and adoption of all school district policies. In addition, since the late 1990s, there has been an increasing emphasis on the “improvement of student achievement as a major objective for school boards,” but very few studies explore whether and how boards meet this objective (Land, 2002, p. 230), including how board members might perceive or use data in such work (Coburn & Turner, 2012).

In an environment with increasing expectations for educators to examine data toward improving student achievement (Coburn & Turner, 2012; Honig & Coburn, 2008), one might expect the use of quality evidence and data would be paramount in school boards’ decision making processes as well. However, studies have found that school board members rarely draw upon research, data, or evidence (Asen, Gurke, Conners, Solomon, & Gumm, 2013). With federal legislation requiring evidence-based decision making, how and why is it the case that local school policymakers may not use data in their work? Considering that data use is a growing expectation across the entire education system, Coburn and Turner (2012) put it best:

Investigating the practice of data use directly is important if we are to understand what is happening at the ground level of one of the most prominent strategies for educational improvement in the country. Understanding the practice of data use not only can help us explain the outcomes of data use but also provides insight into when and under what conditions data use acts as a productive pathway to educational improvement and when it does not. (p. 100)

Drawing from a year-long, qualitative case study that explored one Midwestern, rural school district, this research explored the following questions:

1. What resources do board members use in making decisions?
2. How do board members understand the idea of evidence and/or data?
3. How and when do they use different kinds of evidence and/or data in deciding what is best for students?

The study is framed by theories on sensemaking and evidence/data use in local contexts (Dorner, 2011; Evans, 2007; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; Turner, 2015; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). In turn, this chapter has four main objectives, which correspond to each major section that follows this introduction:

- Review the responsibilities and configurations of school boards in the U.S.;
- Apply theories of sensemaking and evidence use to help illuminate and understand school board decision-making processes;
- Analyze one local case, to consider the opportunities and impediments that school boards face in using data; and,
- Design practical implications for enhancing the work of school boards and future research on data use.
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