"Tell Them Local Control is Important": A Case Study of Democratic, Community-Centered School Boards

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Abstract: Democratically elected school boards in the United States play a crucial role in school governance because they enable community voice in educational practices and programs. Research on locally controlled boards finds they can be undemocratic and unproductive. However, little research has been conducted in rural or small towns, where local control persists through formal and informal means. This qualitative case study examines two rural, locally controlled school boards to understand how they engage in community-centered democratic governance, and the extent that they influence the technical core of schooling. The process of developing and approving school district budgets is used as illustrative examples of the enactment of local control. The findings from this study explain how small, locally controlled school boards employ elements of democratic governance, and that their community governance influences the technical core of schooling. The study provides a rural counter-narrative to previous research on local control, demonstrating that local control enacted by school boards can be an effective democratic practice that shapes teaching and learning in public schools. The article concludes with recommended practices non-rural school boards and communities can employ to expand democratic participation in their schools, as well as future directions for research.
Keywords: boards of education; democracy; participative decision making; community control; school districts; school district autonomy; superintendents; rural schools; budgeting; case studies

"Dígales que el control local es importante": Un estudio de caso de juntas escolares democráticas y centradas en la comunidad

Resumen: Las juntas escolares elegidas democráticamente en los Estados Unidos juegan un papel crucial en el gobierno escolar porque permiten la voz de la comunidad en las prácticas y programas educativos. La investigación sobre juntas controladas localmente encuentra que pueden ser antidemocráticas e improductivas. Sin embargo, se han realizado pocas investigaciones en pueblos rurales o pequeños, donde el control local persiste a través de medios formales e informales. Este estudio de caso cualitativo examina dos juntas escolares rurales controladas localmente para comprender cómo se involucran en la gobernanza democrática centrada en la comunidad y en qué medida influyen en el núcleo técnico de la educación. El proceso de desarrollo y aprobación de los presupuestos de los distritos escolares se utiliza como ejemplos ilustrativos de la promulgación del control local. Los hallazgos de este estudio explican cómo las pequeñas juntas escolares controladas localmente emplean elementos de gobierno democrático y que su gobierno comunitario influye en el núcleo técnico de la educación. El estudio proporciona una narrativa rural contraria a la investigación previa sobre el control local, lo que demuestra que el control local promulgado por las juntas escolares puede ser una práctica democrática eficaz que da forma a la enseñanza y el aprendizaje en las escuelas públicas. El artículo concluye con prácticas recomendadas que las juntas y comunidades de escuelas no rurales pueden emplear para ampliar la participación democrática en sus escuelas, así como futuras direcciones para la investigación.

Palabras-clave: juntas de educación; la democracia; toma de decisiones participativa; control comunitario; distritos escolares; autonomía del distrito escolar; superintendentes; escuelas rurales; presupuestación; estudios de caso

"Diga a eles que o controle local é importante": Um estudo de caso de conselhos escolares democráticos e centrados na comunidade

Resumo: Os conselhos escolares eleitos democraticamente nos Estados Unidos desempenham um papel crucial na governança escolar porque permitem a voz da comunidade nas práticas e programas educacionais. Pesquisas sobre conselhos controlados localmente mostram que eles podem ser antidemocráticos e improdutivos. No entanto, poucas pesquisas foram realizadas em cidades pequenas ou rurais, onde o controle local persiste por meios formais e informais. Este estudo de caso qualitativo examina dois conselhos escolares rurais controlados localmente para entender como eles se envolvem na governança democrática centrada na comunidade e até que ponto eles influenciam o núcleo técnico da educação. O processo de desenvolvimento e aprovação de orçamentos do distrito escolar é usado como exemplos ilustrativos da promulgação do controle local. As descobertas deste estudo explicam como pequenos conselhos escolares controlados localmente empregam elementos de governança democrática e que sua governança comunitária influencia o núcleo técnico da educação. O estudo fornece uma contra-narrativa rural para pesquisas anteriores sobre controle local, demonstrando que o controle local decretado pelos conselhos escolares pode ser uma prática democrática eficaz que molda o ensino e a aprendizagem nas escolas públicas. O artigo conclui com recomendações de práticas que conselhos escolares não rurais e comunidades podem empregar para expandir a participação democrática em suas escolas, bem como direções futuras para pesquisas.

"Tell Them Local Control is Important": A Case Study of Democratic, Community-Centered School Boards

On a cold Tuesday in March, a school board director in Vermont stood before his assembled community at the annual town meeting, a form of participatory democracy dating back to Colonial America (Bryan, 2010). Residents were bundled in wool sweaters and ski jackets, listening attentively as children played on snowbanks outside. The town's elementary school faced an uncertain future, as the state legislature pressed for district consolidation as education budgets climbed. The director was well-known in the community for his blunt, fiscally conservative approach to leadership. In addition to serving on the school board for 20 years, he was the local volunteer fire chief, a small business owner, and member of the local police department. At this moment, however, he was unusually emotive. Plaintively, he asked the audience to speak to their representatives at the state house. "Tell them local control is important. Tell them you want to raise your hand and decide for the school in your town meeting… The DOE thinks only they know what is right." The board director continued, telling the assembled residents that if consolidation passes, the local school "will become a cog in the state district machine… We would be vulnerable because of our success and would be most likely to be picked apart" with staff reassigned to underperforming schools.

"It sounds to me that what we need to get rid of is the State!" a woman called out. The entire room broke into laughter, but many nodded in agreement. This community strongly believed in local control of educational governance and had a legacy of fighting to retain it.

This meeting, which I documented with ethnographic fieldnotes, was not unique to Vermont; similar concerns over local control have played out across the country. The conflict between local and non-local – federal and state – educational policy has persisted for over a century in the United States (e.g., Callahan, 1962; Ferrare & Phillippo, 2021; Sampson & Bertrand, 2022; Tyack, 1974). The focus of community ire varies: mask mandates and critical race theory are current issues (Kamenetz, 2021; Mervosh & Heyward, 2021), but were preceded by conflict over Common Core State Standards (Supovitz et al., 2018; Ujifusa, 2021), the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (Gordon, 2003; Sunderman & Kim, 2007), school finance and consolidation (Hall & Burfoot-Rochford, 2014; Howley et al., 2011), and other non-local policies.

Despite the fierce, persistent contestation of external policy implementation in local communities, many policymakers and researchers believe local control is obsolete (Henig, 2009). Indeed, substantive educational policy scholarship documents the problems with local control: it is ineffective (Malen, 2003; Scribner, 2016), disruptive (Mountford, 2004), and reproduce inequities to maintain status quo (Trujillo, 2013; Ziegler et al., 1974). What then accounts for the disconnect between the lived realities of local communities across the country and empirically rigorous research on local obsolescence (Henig, 2009)?

Simply put, research has not attended to the regions where local control is most active. Research on local educational governance is overwhelmingly situated in urban, exurban, and suburban districts (DeBray et al., 2020; Diem et al., 2015; Kenney, 2020; Reckhow et al., 2017; Sampson, 2018; Trujillo, 2013), where power is diffusely spread across multiple competing actors and policy groups in population dense geospatial regions (Marsh & Wohlstetter, 2013). In rural

communities, which account for over half of all districts nationwide (NCES, 2016), local control of education is a geopolitical necessity, enacted either formally through legal statutes like school boards, or via unofficial, informal community engagement (Bauch, 2001; Sutherland, 2020).

Despite the prevalence of local control in rural communities and small towns, little research has been conducted on its enactment in rural regions. Thus, the purpose of this study is to empirically study the enactment of local control in rural districts. Using Gutmann's (2001) theory of deliberative democracy as a foundational frame, I conducted a qualitative, multiple case study with ethnographic methods of data collection (Yin, 2018) to understand the enactment of local control. In the following sections, I outline my theoretical framework, synthesize scholarly arguments about the role and value of locally controlled school boards, and describe my multi-year data collection process. Using illustrative examples from the findings, I analyze the extent of democratic governance in these rural communities, and how they influence the technical core of schooling.

Theoretical Framework and Research Questions

To frame my study design and analysis, I use Gutmann's (2001) theory of community controlled democratic education and the organizational theory of the technical core of schooling (e.g., Elmore, 2000; Spillane et al., 2019). Together, these theories enable critical analysis of the limitations and possibilities of democratic, local governance of education.

Gutmann's (2001) theory of deliberative, democratic education provides an exemplar of local control in small, rural communities. In her dialectical text, Gutmann articulates deliberative democratic education, which shares educational authority between parents, citizens, and professional educators in a democratic society (2001, p. 42). She offers a theoretical example of "something like a small, modern New England town turned into an independent state," where citizens encompass diverse beliefs (Gutmann, 2001, p. 72). Gutmann (2001) writes:

> In an extremely small society, democratic control can be effective, and the effects of democratic decision making significant. Members of the school board are held accountable for their policies by voters. Voters have relatively easy access to information about the school board's policies and how the schools are run on the basis of those policies. (p. 73)

In this example, smaller districts enable governing accountability through democratic elections and accessibility to the decisions boards make, and the outcomes of those decisions. "Because the lines of accountability are so short and clearly drawn, policies can make a discernible difference in how schools are run," Gutmann continues (2001, p. 73). The caveat, however, is that local board elections need to be "competitive" and board activities need to be "conducive to public deliberation" to ensure democratic participation of both community members and educational leaders (Gutmann, 2001, p. 73). While Gutmann's (2001) example of effective local governance is hypothetical, I use the model as an analytic framework for my case study sites.

One of the main arguments against local control is that schools, as organizational institutions, are remarkably resistant to reform (Cuban, 1993; Marsh et al., 2020). Schools have their own the rules and structures that shape organization and instruction of public education (Cuban, 1993; Elmore, 2000), further constrained by layers of federal and state policies (Kirst, 1984), which produce a standardized technical core of policies, programs, and practices that are highly resistant to change (Marsh et al., 2020). Formal influence from district and school leadership is necessary to produce major changes to the technical core of schools (Petersen et al., 1987; Spillane et al., 2019). Research on school boards, in contrast, strongly suggests community boards are unable to influence

the technical core of schooling (e.g., Malen, 2003; Smrekar & Crowson, 2015). The purpose of this study is to examine the enactment of local control by school boards to assess the extent to which boards are representative of deliberative democracy (Gutmann, 2001), and if they have a mediating influence on the technical core of schooling. Specifically, my research questions are: 1) How are the case study boards employing elements of democratic community control, and 2) What effects do locally controlled boards have on the technical core of schooling?

Review of Research

The research on local control and school boards is limited: most empirical research is situated in non-rural districts, and most rural scholarship is theoretical. In this review of research, I address the fragmentation of this field of scholarship by first reviewing the history of locally controlled school boards in the United States. Next, I synthesize research on school boards as democratic institutions and Henig's (2009) theory of local obsolescence. I then discuss scholarship on the prevalence of local control in rural regions, and the theorized significance of community control of schools. I conclude with state-specific background information to situate readers to the policy context of the research.

Local Control and School Boards

Local control, enacted through democratically elected school boards, is one of the oldest American educational traditions, dating back to New England's use of town meetings and common schools in the 17th century (Tyack, 1974). Voting members of the community gather at a town meeting to publicly discuss and debate decisions for the school and the town (Bryan, 2010). Over time, ineffective community boards failed to produce consistent and equitable outcomes (Tyack, 1974), and subsequent reforms curtailed local control. Educational governance by locally elected school boards was replaced by superintendents and district administrators in a push to centralize and professionalize public education (Callahan, 1962; Tyack, 1974). Widespread consolidation caused a dramatic decrease in the number of districts nationwide; the remaining districts were geographically larger, therein limiting community access and voice in school governance (Theobald, 1997). The number of boards significantly decreased in tandem with their loss of authority (Land, 2002).

While school boards remain the primary form of community governance for U.S. public education (Alsbury, 2008; Lutz & Iannaccone, 2008), scholars question the legitimacy of their democratic governance. In 1974, Zeigler, Jennings and Peak conducted one of the first large scale analyses of school board participation, finding minimal community participation in school board elections. "There is no representative process in the politically understood sense of the term. With regard to education … we now have taxation without representation," (Ziegler, 1973, p. 41). Other research, such as Wirt and Kirst's (1989) analysis of decision-output theory, concluded communities had minimal influence over school governance.

As the role of federal and state government in educational policy expanded in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the rapid expansion of federalism was associated with declining local control (Malen, 2003; Scribner, 2016). Per this line of research, community control as described by Gutmann (2001) is considered a "myth" rather than a "societal foundation" (Smrekar & Crowson, 2015, p. 2). Multiple empirical studies document the limited or lack of democratic representation in urban, exurban, and suburban school boards (Bertrand & Sampson, 2022; DeBray et al., 2020; Diem et al., 2015; Henig et al., 2019; Kenney, 2020; Reckhow et al., 2017; Sampson, 2018; Trujillo, 2013). Much of this scholarship suggests community school boards are undemocratic, reinforcing dominant community values and reproducing inequities (Bertrand & Sampson, 2022; Diem et al.,

2015); ineffectively delegating authority to central office professionals (Malen, 2003), or are obsolete as a form of local control (Henig, 2009; Scribner, 2016). Henig explains "local obsolescence" research on the limits of local control has "helped to further an image of localities as parochial, reactionary, ineffective, and appropriately marginalized in the enterprise of school reform," (Henig, 2009, p. 112).

A key problem with research on local control, or lack thereof, is that almost all research has been conducted in non-rural contexts. In contrast to urban and suburban districts, rural communities are typically geographically distant from economic, social, and political centers of power (Tieken, 2017). Local Education Agency (LEA) oversight provided by district administrators and school boards is typically geographically distant from rural communities, or it is under-resourced in comparison to non-rural districts (McHenry-Sorber & Sutherland, 2019). In a national analysis of resistance and adoption of NCLB, Shelly (2008, 2012) found sparsely populated states had smaller governance structures and fewer resources to oversee centralized educational control. Centralization and control of education necessitate governmental and organizational capacity; as a result, states with smaller, predominantly rural populations were more likely to delegate governance to local communities out of necessity (Shelly, 2012). Local control also persists in rural areas of states with highly centralized educational governance, such as New York and Pennsylvania, where the geographic spread of LEAs necessitates place-based educational governance. Finally, some research suggests community members in rural and small towns will enact informal forms of local control even when not granted official governance responsibilities (Bauch, 2001; Sutherland, 2016, 2020).

The Role of Local Control in Rural Communities

Rural scholars theorize schools, as primary community institutions, encourage and require local democratic participation in governance (Howley & Howley, 2010; Schafft, 2016). In contrast, the centralized, global approach to neoliberal education severs the critical relationship between communities and their local schools (Apple, 2006; Corbett, 2007; Schafft, 2010). Scholars assert rural communities that retain local control of educational governance are better positioned to implement place-based pedagogy (Gruenwald, 2003) and leadership (Budge, 2010; Harmon & Schafft, 2009) that reflects the ecological and social values of communities (Budge, 2006; Crowson & Hinz, 2015).

Rural communities are not monolithic, however, and they encompass an array of competing values (Corbett, 2014; McHenry-Sorber & Schafft, 2015). Scholars across geopolitical contexts have critiqued dimensions of power and voice in place-based governance (Diem et al., 2015; McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018; Trujillo, 2013), where participation in local governance is based on normative values of belonging (Sutherland et al., 2022). Gutmann (2001) cautions, "education is not democratic if citizens do not collectively influence the purposes of primary schooling nor if they control the content of classroom teaching so as to repress reasonable challenges to dominant political perspectives" (p. 76). In cases where school boards have the ongoing support of their communities, the values they represent may still only reflect those of the dominant majority.

It is no wonder the debate over the extent and value of democratic local control persists: research is complex, contradictory, and incomplete. The purpose of this study is to provide an empirical analysis of the enactment of local control in rural districts as a means to strengthen current understandings of this element of educational policy and governance.

Vermont Education Policy

The study is situated in Vermont, a predominantly rural U.S. state with a legacy of locally controlled school districts (Bryan, 2010). The state provides an unusual opportunity to investigate deliberative democracy and locally controlled school boards due to education policies including

progressive educational funding, participatory democracy via town meetings, and regional governance structures. Each of these elements is discussed briefly below.

Vermont has a progressive, centralized educational funding system. The funding system was created in response to Vermont Supreme Court's ruling in *Brigham v. State* (1997) that a prior school funding system created educational inequities. Districts create local budgets, which are approved by residents at the annual school district meeting (Shlaes, 1999). The state then collects local education taxes and redistributes them to communities per equalized pupil (Furney et al., 2005). Districts can spend more than the per equalized pupil rate; however, districts are fined a large penalty if they raise local tax rates over 125% of the excess spending threshold. To offset inequities prompted by economies of scale, the legislature also created Small Schools Grants to supplement schools with 100 or fewer students (Picus et al., 2012). The legislation has been controversial; nonetheless, from a research perspective, the equitable finance system produces greater fiscal homogeneity, enabling comparisons of budget priorities.

A major feature of Vermont's educational system is the use of deliberative democracy to enable community access and participation with local educational governance. Vermont school districts hold annual meetings where residents discuss and debate the school budget and other relevant educational issues. Most communities hold district meetings in tandem with the annual Town Meeting Day, the first Tuesday of March, which is an unpaid, optional holiday for all state residents. Participatory town meetings are "the key to town government, as voters assemble to discuss issues, debate budgets, air grievances, elect officers, and determine the town and school district business for the coming year," (Vermont League of Cities and Towns, 2007, p. 95). The meetings provide a significant opportunity to observe deliberative democracy between school boards and their communities.

Additionally, the organization of Vermont's LEAs incorporates regional management in tandem with town-based local control. Most LEAs in Vermont are Supervisory Unions (SU), an organizational structure led by a superintendent and regionally representative school board. Some SUs are comprised of multiple districts, each with their own local school boards, as well as a single regional superintendent and SU board. The Multi-District SU (MDSU) structure is common across the New England region and is similar to regional or intermediate districts in states like New York, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Alaska, and South Carolina (Hall & McHenry-Sorber, 2017; McHenry-Sorber & Sutherland, 2019). The case study sites are part of the same MDSU.

Research Methods and Analysis

The research is a qualitative multiple case study (Creswell & Poth, 2018) of neighboring, locally controlled school districts in Vermont. The study was conducted between 2013 - 2016 during a contentious state-wide consolidation debate (Hall & Burfoot-Rochford, 2014). Findings were initially embargoed per participant request, with follow-up data collection completed in 2022. I employed qualitative methods of data collection: ethnographic observations of school and community events, semi-structured participant interviews, and documents related to school governance and communication. I thematically coded data, then used a combination of comparative analysis and conceptual matrices to identify within and cross case themes (Miles et al., 2018). The resulting analysis illustrates how two autonomous districts employ similar mechanisms of enacting local control, despite differences in their educational practices.

Site Selection and Access

The multiple case study (Yin, 2018) is comprised of two rural school districts in Vermont, USA: Appleton[1] and Oxford. The sites were purposively selected to comparatively investigate local control of education. Each is comprised of a single rural town: Appleton is classified as a rural, distant community and Oxford is a rural, remote community (NCES, 2022) (for more, on rural classifications, see Biddle et al., 2019 or Longhurst, 2022). Appleton and Oxford are neighboring towns in the same MDSU. Each town has a local school board, in addition to the MDSU-wide board. Although the MDSU-board is granted most legal authority, it was ineffective as a governing body during the study, as the sizeable composite board was rarely able to achieve a quorum at meetings. Thus, most governing authority was delegated to district boards. At the start of the study, Oxford had a five-member board, and Appleton had a three-member board. In 2016, Appleton residents voted to expand their board to five members due to increasing responsibilities (see Table 1 for 2016 board composition).

Table 1

School Board Composition, 2016

Town	Board Members	Gender	Profession
Appleton	Board Chair	Female	Non-Profit Director
	Board Member	Female	Higher Education Staff
	Board Member	Male	Remote Professional
	Board Member[1]	Male	Farmer
	Board Member[1]	Female	Arts Administrator
Oxford	Board Chair	Male	Fire Chief & Contractor
	Board Member	Female	Legislator
	Board Member	Male	Ski Mountain Director
	Board Member	Female	Medical Professional
	Board Member	Male	Accountant

[1]New board members, appointed in 2016, following board expansion to five members

Each town has similar racial and economic demographics (see Table 2). As is common in rural New England, each town has a single elementary school. Oxford's school serves students from three-year-old preschool to sixth grade; Appleton is the same but continues through eighth grade. Both communities offer school choice for middle and/or high school. The communities have different educational approaches, as discussed in the findings, yet their common organizational, geographic, and demographic characteristics enable comparisons (Yin, 2018).

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[1] The study was conducted with IRB oversight; all names are pseudonyms, and key identifying details have been obscured to protect confidentiality of participants.

Table 2

Characteristics of Case Study Districts, 2016

Characteristics	Appleton	Oxford
Town Population [a]	1100	1100
Town Racial Composition	96% white	96% white
Town Poverty Rate [a]	10%	8%
School Organization	3PK – 8	3PK – 6
School Population [b]	~90	~100
Free & Reduced-Price Lunch [b]	45%	35%

([a] U.S. Census Bureau, 2016; [b] NCES, 2016)

Participants

I negotiated access to the schools in the study through two gatekeepers: the principal of Oxford Elementary School and the multi-district SU superintendent, a resident of Appleton. These two administrators facilitated connections with the Appleton principal, and they introduced me at Appleton and Oxford school board meetings. I invited school board members to participate in board meetings; all the board members and several former members agreed to participate. I used email to invite interested faculty from each school to speak with me, as well as snowball sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to connect with community members and parents. The length of time I spent in each community facilitated trust and interest in my work, as people came to recognize me at stores, school, and town events. My ethnographic approach did create variability of data across sites, however (see Table 3). To address the limitation of comparable data collection, I sought to gather an equal amount of data overall from both schools to balance the range of participant volunteers across each site.

Table 3

Data Collection: Study Participants for Interviews and Focus Groups

Participants	Appleton	Oxford
Board Members	Board Chair Current board members (4) Former board members (2)	Board Chair Current board members (5) Former board member
Administrators	MDSU Superintendent* Principal	MDSU Superintendent* Principal
School Staff	Classroom teachers (7) Office manager Librarian	Classroom teachers (3) Office manager
Parents & Community Members	Community members (3)	Parent focus group (5) Community focus group (4)
Total Participants	21	21

* The same MDSU superintendent served both districts.

Data Collection

I used three different sources of school and community data for the analysis: observations documented by ethnographic fieldnotes, semi-structured participant interviews, and school-related documents. I collected data during nine separate fieldwork trips between 2013 – 2016, and a follow-up in 2022; each trip lasted one to two weeks.

Observations enabled me to see patterns of social interaction and discourse in different communities and school sites (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I therefore observed places that helped me understand the culture of the school, school board, the community, and their relationships with each other. Observation sites included 11 school board and school district meetings, three town meetings, and three school–community events, for a total of 35 hours documented by fieldnotes. In my role as a non-participant observer (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), I recorded field notes during observations and expanded them after leaving the field (Emerson et al., 2011). Within each school, I observed general routines such as morning entry, recess, and lunch, as well as classes. I observed three classrooms at Oxford, and four in Appleton, for a total of 28 hours of school-based observations documented by fieldnotes.

Interviews provided an in-depth understanding of school and community values, culture, and history (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). I conducted 40 semi-structured participant interviews or focus groups with school leaders (superintendent, principals, office managers), teachers, school board members, parents, and community leaders (see Table 2). I interviewed the superintendent and principals four times each, and school board chairs twice. Most interviews lasted between 30 – 60 minutes, although some participants chose to extend interviews up to 120 minutes. Protocols were semi-structured and role-specific (Creswell & Poth, 2018), designed to facilitate conversations about educational beliefs and practices in each district. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Although I strove to ensure uniform data collection across the case study sites, participant interest and availability created some variability, which I addressed through observations and document analysis.

I collected three types of documents: official town materials such as the annual town report (11 documents); published school board meeting agendas, minutes, and policies (35 documents); and newspaper articles about each school (28 documents). Hard copies of town reports were provided by the principals, and other documents were gathered online at official SU and district websites, newspapers, and the towns. The documents facilitated understanding of both formal and informal communications between the schools, school boards, and their respective communities (Yin, 2018). Further, I collected online comments from community-specific forums on the social media site Front Porch Forum, and from opinion and comment sections of two local newspapers. I used town records to verify commenters were residents and excluded comments that could not be identified. These informal, public comments provided alternate perspectives on critical educational issues for each town.

Data Analysis

I used an iterative coding process to identify emerging patterns and contradictory evidence (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I began analysis by coding with NVivo software, using a broad *a priori* scheme. *A priori* code families included descriptive terms, as well as theoretical terms from Gutmann's (2001) theory of the enactment of democratic governance, evidence of school-community relationships, and common elements of the technical core of schooling. I then conducted a second round of within-case thematic coding (Miles et al., 2018) using *in vivo* and *emic* phrases for educational beliefs, educational practices, programs, and policies, and descriptive characteristics of each school and community.

I sorted all coded data within-case, into role-specific thematic matrices (Miles et al., 2018), with categories to delineate perspectives from within the educational setting (e.g., educators, administrators), outside the educational setting (e.g., parents, community members), and bridging across the school and community settings (school board members). I then used the thematic matrices to identify within-case themes of conceptual alignment, such as relationship between democratic control and the technical core of schooling via school budgeting, as well as to identify contested themes, such as the extent of minoritized community representation. I then conducted cross-case analysis across the thematic categories of each matrix (Miles et al., 2018), which illustrated congruency of major findings, and highlighted case-based differences.

My iterative coding and analysis process incorporated all sources of data, and the structured thematic conceptual matrices enabled triangulation across data sources (Miles et al., 2018). Administrative leaders reviewed preliminary findings with me (Creswell & Poth, 2018), providing critical feedback and follow-up suggestions during the initial data analysis. I also sought out contradictory perspectives in each community to ensure a wide range of perspectives were included in the study (Miles et al., 2018). Seven participants (board members & administrators) provided member checks for the final manuscript. The findings were reviewed by district leaders, and embargoed at their request from 2016–2019, due to ongoing political debates about local control of education. I conducted an additional visit in 2022 to assess the relevance of the findings after the embargo and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings

In this qualitative case study, I begin by illustrating each town's social, economic, and geographic community to contextualize dominant educational priorities. The shared commonalities of Appleton and Oxford as neighboring rural school districts highlight the differences in their educational policies, programs, and practices. Using the annual school budgeting process as an example of local governance, I first assess the elements of democratic governance, and then comparatively analyze the extent to which community funding priorities influence the technical core of schooling. I find case study boards employ some, but not all, elements of democratic community control. Significantly, the enactment of local control in Oxford changes the technical core of schooling and reinforces the technical core at Appleton. Each of these findings are discussed in detail in the following section.

Oxford: The Mountain Town

The town of Oxford is located over 30 miles from the nearest urban area. Despite its remoteness, Oxford is an active center of commerce thanks to a large ski mountain and its supporting tourist industry of restaurants, rental shops, and inns. The majority of businesses are locally owned, and there is a noticeable absence of national chains. The principal explained the appeal of Oxford, saying, "because we are a tourist-based economy, we have people flowing in and out … that want to leave the big city, and they want a taste of the small town, but they still want restaurants around. Well, this is the perfect place for it." The appeal to people from away is strong; most homes are owned by part-time residents (US Census, 2020). Oxford's ski mountain industry draws a sizable international population, some of whom have become permanent residents. The seasonal, international influx of tourists and second homeowners influences the overall characteristics of the community. One Oxford teacher noted the "diversity" of the community, explaining, "there are many people who are born and bred in [Oxford]," as well as the "influx of people who may have started off as second homeowners" and moved to the community full-time.

The teacher's description of diversity refers to economic and social mobility versus generational residents. Oxford, like most of Vermont, lacks racial diversity; 95% of residents identify as white, non-Hispanic (U.S. Census, 2020).

As a ski mountain town, Oxford's population is defined by "mountain politics" – the economic and socio-cultural aspects of seasonal tourism in a remote rural region. One district leader explained, "Mountain politics has always influenced Oxford… Those are much more conservative people, they're business oriented, they don't like taxation." The superintendent called Oxford "the most right-wing" of the MDSU towns. A board member offered a more nuanced assessment, noting "I'm certainly not a right-wing Republican. I'm a Libertarian. I support gay marriage or whatever else it might be that would be considered socially liberal, but I also tend to be very fiscally conservative." Oxford's mountain politics promotes fiscal conservatism, as the community is mindful of the economic volatility of seasonal tourism.

Vermont's liberal social agenda generated significant ire from Oxford residents. "Vermont, in general, tends to be too left-wing on fiscal issues… The old joke is, 'Vermonters always like big government, as long as somebody else pays for it'," the board chair said. Socialism was used as an epithet at public forums, prompting one beleaguered official to shout, "I know the "S word" has been used here, but I am a responsible capitalist!" Oxford residents were deeply opposed to Vermont's educational financing, which they described as a "fiscal train wreck." Under the equity-based legislation, Oxford was considered a "gold town" – a statewide colloquial term for wealthier communities with robust tax bases. In Oxford's case, the town sent three times more in taxes to the state than it received back for educational expenses. The town took assertive measures to overturn Act 60/68, including jointly suing the state with several other communities, withholding payment of annual taxes, and protesting at the state capital. While none of the measures immediately changed the legislation, community members persisted, pursuing political and legal pathways for reform. Oxford's long-term efforts appear to have merited success; in 2022, Vermont lawmakers passed 127, the first major educational finance reform in 25 years (Act 127, 2022).

Correspondingly, Oxford's community members routinely attended to the economic aspects of local education. School initiatives promoted by the school board were framed as "academically sound, taxpayer friendly," coupling student outcomes with fiscal responsibility. The school board supported implementation of programs to ensure long-term fiscal responsibility, such as expanding school-based early childhood education (ECE). At the time, neither the state nor federal government offered funding for expanded ECE. Oxford's community approved the ECE budget increase, after school leaders explained ECE would reduce long-term special education costs through early interventions. The example reflects the community's willingness to invest time and money in school programs, based on long-term fiscal and educational benefits.

Appleton: The College Town

Appleton is a rural community located 10 miles from a small urban center. The town's primary business is a liberal arts college, which retains a progressive and environmental mission of education. Other businesses include artist studios, farms, and inns. Many residents have creative careers as musicians, writers, or visual artists, while others work for local non-profits. The town is described as "peaceful" and "idyllic." To preserve community character, the town has left many roads unpaved; a consequence of which is that large sections of Appleton are inaccessible by car during "mud season" or spring thaw. The town developed zoning laws to limit subdivisions and rental properties. The superintendent called Appleton "quite leftist," which he attributed to "the influence of the college people. The majority of people are pretty well-educated, and middle class or better." Another resident explained, "I think people like the rusticness… the simplicity, the sense

that maybe it discourages more people from moving in. People are not really interested in the town getting a lot larger."

Historically, Appleton was one of the sites for communal living that proliferated in Vermont in the 1960s and 1970s. The communitarian values of democratic governance, community consensus, and civil disobedience persist among residents. At the town meeting in 2015, for example, residents spent several hours debating whether to donate $500 to fund the Red Cross due to their policy banning gay men from donating blood. When asked if the debate was typical for the community, a resident replied, "Yes…I would definitely classify them as activist, engaged citizens."

In Appleton, the progressive, artistic, and community-minded values of many in the community create the foundation for their public elementary school. The school was founded in the 1960s by college faculty and community members who promoted progressive, experiential education. The school was, and continues to be, intentionally designed as a democratic learning environment. The school is structured to facilitate community connections by maintaining multi-age classrooms, small class sizes, and democratic practices including school and classroom meetings. Multiple participants said the school created a close sense of community. One shared, "[the school] is very tiny, very intimate classrooms. Kids get a lot of individualized attention."

Other facets of the school's pedagogy are shaped by the progressive values of the community at large, including experiential and hands-on learning, integrated curriculum, and portfolio-based assessments. Students are encouraged to self-select learning activities and are required to conduct extensive independent field research projects in upper grades. Many participants believe the experiential aspects of Appleton's school are "fostering a love of learning, [because] experience-based education teaches students to apply what they've learned in the world and take what they've learned in the world and apply it to classrooms." Students travel to national and international destinations as part of the integrated, field research program.

While Appleton's school has a strong internal identity, it is closely linked with the values of the broader community. "I would say that the community would like to see the school continue to be student-centered, continue to foster the arts, foster a sense of our place in the wider world, and civic responsibility," one resident explained. The school principal noted that "a key characteristic" of Appleton's school "is strong support that it enjoys in the community. The community's very proud of it as a school. I think that it has a history that not only makes [the school] unique, but also results in the community really being behind it." In Appleton, the community has supported a progressive, democratic vision of education where school is an investment in future contributing citizens to the society.

The School Budget Process as a Mechanism of Local Control

In the thematic data matrices, the school budget generates the most community engagement, due to established structures of deliberative democracy, and community interest in upcoming property tax rates. I therefore use the budgeting process as an example to analyze how each locally controlled board enacts elements of democratic governance. This section overviews the budgeting process, with analysis of the democratic mechanisms used by the boards, and the effects on the technical core of schooling at each site.

Although there are multiple aspects of educational policy and governance that board members oversee, the school budget approval process was an effective example to reflect the mechanisms of local control. One board member explained how the budget process connects the school board with the community, noting:

> I think the biggest responsibility we take on is the budget… I think a big part of what we are is almost like an ambassador or a liaison between the school and the community, and it kind of goes both ways.

There are elements of the budget that are beyond each district's control, such as insurance, shared services, and special education programming, which are run through the MDSU central office. District leaders do have control over organizational, instructional, and programmatic elements. These elements can include the number of teachers and assistants which influence class sizes; specialist instruction in art, music, gym, foreign languages, and technology; after school programs; ECE; curriculum and instructional materials; professional development, and field trips or special events. These elements make up the technical core of schools: the process of teaching and learning (Elmore, 2000; Marsh et al., 2020).

Like most rural school districts, the school budgeting process begins with educational administrators. Oxford and Appleton school principals created initial budgets in-house. "I build the budget from scratch. I don't rely on the MDSU business manager to build it," Oxford's principal explained. The principals then presented the budgets to their school boards for review and discussion. The board's role is limited; Appleton's principal explained board members "might have some opinions about, 'well, wouldn't it make sense to cut here or cut there?' But the process is that I bring them a budget and they give feedback, but not be in there setting the budget." Appleton's board chair concurred, noting "We are going through the budget kind of line by line, and making decisions about what expenses make sense." All district leaders stressed the importance of keeping the budget "accountable to the school and the community" and to "figure out all the tax implications," which are also of central importance to community taxpayers.

The review process was easily accessible to all residents, a central component of Gutmann's (2001) democratic framework. All the board review process was conducted during open public meetings that were posted, or warned, in advance, and town residents were encouraged to attend. "The entire process is happening in a way that is open and transparent to the community, if they choose to participate…" Appleton's board chair explained. However, the community attendance at the budget review meetings was small. For example, one Appleton board member enthusiastically noted that "last year, a number of people" participated, which she identified as "two to three people who were coming in and participating in our meetings in a very constructive way." Here, the board member considered regular attendance of two or three residents as a notable turnout, which is reflective of the small, rural communities. It was not uncommon to have limited community participation during the initial budgeting process; typically, zero to five community members attended meetings.

Residents who did not attend board meetings had multiple opportunities to access information about the proposals, though. Once the budgets were finalized, they were publicly shared with town residents per Vermont statutes, both in print and digitally as part of annual town reports. Appleton's board included brief narrative explanations of costs, while Oxford provided a line-by-line breakdown of the budget, noting changes from previous years.

Oxford's principal noted that in a small town, it is relatively easy for residents to informally learn about board policies: "There's only 1100 people in [Oxford], So, going to get a coffee, they know people that are on the Board, they talk to them." He added, "when it gets down to the nitty-gritty there's a pre-town meeting that happens a week beforehand." Both boards held pre-town meeting informational sessions one or two weeks ahead of the annual school meeting. The informal meeting was an essential component of the deliberative democratic process, as board members explained the budget in detail and community members openly asked questions and raised concerns before they voted. "There is a lot of trust that the School Board has done their homework… They try to answer most questions beforehand," one Oxford educator said. Typically, the informational meetings have a higher turnout; participants have estimated attendance ranging from 30 to 100 audience members, depending on the year.

The annual town meeting was the final opportunity for community input on the school budget. Like many Vermont towns, Oxford and Appleton scheduled the annual school district meeting for the same day as the town meeting. At the annual meetings, each board chair presented the district budgets at the public forum, similar to the informational session. The board chairs summarized the district's financial priorities and addressed critical issues that residents raised in the informational sessions. Residents had time to ask questions, debate specific topics, and then vote to approve the budget. Both districts used participatory democracy where residents voted by calling out "Aye" or "Nay." Residents then held their hands up until town leaders were able to document a tally of Ayes versus Nays.

Over the course of the study, Appleton and Oxford's budgets always passed. The population in attendance at town meetings, however, was not necessarily representative of all perspectives in each town. Not all residents were able to attend town meetings due to personal or professional commitments, which was a recurring issue in community forum posts. In this analysis, I use majoritarian or dominant beliefs to reflect the recorded votes at town meeting, while also acknowledging the potential exclusion of minoritized voices.

In the following section, I provide illustrative examples of the annual budgeting approval process to analyze the extent to which each community's decisions influence the technical core of schooling.

Changing the Technical Core: Oxford

Oxford, the entrepreneurial ski mountain town, viewed education to be an economic investment. Oxford's school board therefore uses the budget as a tool to implement and support programming that will be "educationally sound, taxpayer friendly." The example described here illustrates how, using the school budgeting process, the district developed and implemented a major change to its technical core that aligned with dominant educational values.

Oxford's school board proposed a multi-year budget increase to implement the International Baccalaureate (IB) program in Oxford's elementary school. The IB program is a global education curriculum used primarily by private schools around the globe. Oxford's board wrote that IB "is a comprehensive curriculum development program that better prepares our students for the 21st Century through a rigorous integration of inquiry-based learning, global perspective, foreign language skills and technology."[2] IB provides flexibility in curricular topics, but significantly shapes elements of the technical core including instructional methods, assessment, specialist classes, and school culture.

The proposal to implement the IB program at Oxford was a local decision, rather than a recommendation from MDSU administrators. Oxford's principal initially proposed IB adoption, as he perceived the focus on global, twenty-first-century learning could enable Oxford "to be a world-class school." He explained the implementation of high-quality global education "can be an economic driver, it can be a sense of community pride, it can get people to stay here, and get people to move here." The principal's use of an economic frame to note the benefits of IB closely aligned with the fiscally conservative, educationally exceptional philosophy of Oxford residents. The IB program could produce high student outcomes, prepare students for a globalized future, and be employed as a tool to recruit new families – and their accompanying economic value – to the town.

Although there was close alignment between the IB program and Oxford's educational values, the school board required the principal to conduct a feasibility study, which included interviewing teachers, staff, families, and residents about their interest in IB. After a year of research, the board concluded the program would be a good fit for Oxford. The IB program added $45,200

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[2] Reference information for the source was blinded per confidentiality agreement.

to the budget for the first year of implementation, with an additional $31,500 per year through the certification process and beyond. The board asked the community to agree to a multi-year increase in educational funding. The principal and the board were not just asking for a commitment to school funding, however. The IB program represented a change in curriculum, instruction, and school culture: a dramatic change to the technical core of schooling.

Throughout the process, the school principal and school board members enabled opportunities for community members to learn about the program, discuss their options, and raise concerns. A large audience, estimated to be 10% of the town's total population, attended the informational pre-town meeting. Attendees wanted more information about the IB program, how it aligned with programming and goals for Oxford's school, evidence of support from the school and parent community, and what the expenses would include. In response, the school board and principal created an informational handout addressing these questions, including a careful breakdown of expenses for the first year of IB implementation. The handout was provided to all attendees at the town meeting. The board chair explained, "We want to be transparent. This is not just a one-time expenditure."

The board's extensive communication about the IB program was effective: after a brief discussion, the estimated 70 residents in attendance unanimously approved funding the IB program. A board member reflected, "we asked for this IB program this year, [and] they gave it to us. You see we spent $2.5 million almost like that, [and] there was only one question asked" at the town meeting. Oxford's principal explained, "When it comes to the school board, there's so much trust and so much history of high-quality delivery of an educationally sound, taxpayer friendly budget."

The ease of approval of the IB program at Oxford's meeting reflects the extent to which the locally controlled school board engaged in deliberative, community-centered democratic governance. The school board used effective, transparent communication about the program with residents. Community members had multiple opportunities to ask questions and share their opinions about funding IB certification. By giving residents both information and opportunities to participate in the decision-making process, the school board engendered community participation and deliberation.

Second, the IB program changed the technical core of the school in a way that aligned with and reinforced Oxford's dominant values of education. The IB program prepares students for economic success in a globalized world; it could establish Oxford as a world-class school, and it could be used as a recruitment tool for new families. All three of these factors were framed as economic investments for residents, many of whom were concerned about the outmigration of local students. At one school district meeting, a resident exhorted, "We spend a lot of money to educate our kids, and then they move elsewhere. The saying is, 'we dare you to make a living in Vermont'!" The IB plan, however, was framed as an economic and academic investment for a global world, aligning with the dominant values of the Oxford community. By including the community in democratic deliberation, and proposing a budget that supported majoritarian community values, Oxford illustrates how locally controlled boards can shape the technical core of schooling through democratic practices.

Reinforcing the Technical Core: Appleton

At the same time the neighboring community of Oxford voted to increase school funding to implement the IB program, Appleton, a rural college town, faced a budget shortfall. In this illustrative example, I analyze how Appleton's locally controlled school board used deliberative democratic practices to reinforce the technical core of schooling during a financial crisis.

Between 2013 and 2015, Appleton's school board faced dramatic increases in educational expenses. The first year of the tax increase roiled the Appleton community, some of whom vented frustrations on the online community forum. "What the heck happened?" one resident asked, "What

did we do to deserve this kind of tax hike?" Most of the posts were from residents who did not attend the community meeting and were "stunned" at the tax increase. One wrote:

> I guess I will have to start attending our local town meetings to see if I can offer some suggestions that would allow us to provide the quality education we all know is desired without placing a tremendous financial burden on our town residents… It is not my intention to either badger or criticize our hard-working town officials. I am pretty sure we can all agree on what a thankless job that must be. My intent is to find some way to provide them with the input from all of the taxpayers …so that they can make the hard choices, based on what a majority of the taxpayers desire.

This post addresses multiple issues of deliberative democracy, including factors that limit attendance at town meetings, community priorities, and commitment to engage in governance processes moving forward. It was the most comprehensive post on the forum, yet it was also typical of the responses concerned residents shared. On Appleton's online discussion board, community members complained, but they also discussed how to remediate the tax hike.

Following the controversial tax increase in 2014, the town faced a second year of needing to raise taxes for educational funding. 85% of increased expenses were "due to expenditures that the school cannot directly control," per the annual report. "The costs for special education, high school tuition, health insurance, and supervisory union charges have all increased, and the school was additionally required to comply with a new state mandate for yearly audits." Appleton was in danger of incurring the state's excess spending penalty, and the school board was tasked to identify major budget cuts to cover the increased expenses. The board also wanted to ensure the community was fully aware of the budgeting process.

Appleton's principal used a democratic model of shared decision-making, so the budgeting process began with school staff collectively identifying funding priorities. The board, aware of the expected budget shortfall, collaboratively strategized with the principal and school staff for possible solutions. Like Oxford, Appleton's board used multiple strategies to inform the community of the fiscal challenges, and to garner input. The board held a series of public meetings, inviting legislative and financial experts to speak to residents about key issues. Meetings were scheduled for evenings and weekends to ensure greatest participation and were recorded and shared online for residents unable to attend. Residents were also welcomed to attend bi-monthly board meetings; one regular attendee explained he attended "just to understand. I went through the whole budget process… when you really do it and you look at it line by line, you really understand, and it's a group effort."

Over the course of the budget revision process, Appleton's board actively sought out community and school feedback on what was critical to maintain, versus what elements could be cut. One resident summed up some of the feedback, sharing, "I would say that the community would like to see the school continue to be student-centered, continue to foster the arts, foster a sense of our place in the wider world, [and develop] civic responsibility." Through this democratic deliberation, Appleton's teaching staff volunteered to forgo annual salary raises in exchange for retaining educational programming. Appleton's board members struggled with the decision of the teachers, even though it was achieved through the school's process of democratic decision-making. At the town meeting, the board chair told the audience, "While this choice was made in consultation with teachers and the principal, the school board is deeply unhappy that appropriate raises won't be given to our talented and dedicated staff." It's a simple but clear example of community engagement in Appleton, as board members implemented a major budget decision that each personally disagreed with, because it was the will of the teaching community.

The proposed budget reflected the collective discussions of Appleton's principal, school staff, school board, and community members who attended meetings over the course of the year. It

also reinforced the technical core of their schooling practices. In their annual report, the board identified their main priority "to keep a stable environment for our students … therefore no changes were made that would impact the current structure of our classrooms or take away from programs like Spanish, art, poetry, movement, or school lunch."

Despite forgoing teacher raises and school board compensation ($300 per board member), and cutting non-essentials, the proposed budget would raise town taxes by 20%. In comparison to Oxford's brief meeting, Appleton residents spent a long time debating the budget. Of the estimated 75 residents present, some wanted to spend more money to protect teachers' salaries, while others wanted to see deeper cuts in the programing. Eventually, Appleton residents unanimously approved the budget. The superintendent, also an Appleton resident, called the community "a poster child for raising taxes" as reflective of "the town's willingness to pay taxes in a commitment to maintaining small schools." Through their deliberative democratic budgeting process, residents of Appleton ultimately prioritized maintaining the technical core of the school, even though it would require residents to pay an additional 20% in property taxes.

This example illustrates the enactment of democratic control to reinforce shared school and community values during a fiscal crisis. The school board actively communicated and collaborated with school staff and community members throughout the budgeting process. The resulting plan was a stark contrast to typical school budget cuts: small class sizes and special programs preserved, teacher salaries were frozen, and residents committed to a tax increase.

Discussion and Implications

The findings from this study explain how small, locally controlled school boards employ elements of democratic governance, and that their community governance influences the technical core of schooling. Using the school budget process as illustrative examples of the enactment of local control, the two case study districts, Appleton and Oxford, I show how the process engendered democratic participation and community voice. Each group within the system – principals, school boards, and community members – informed and influenced the practices and programs in their public schools. In contrast to research on urban and suburban school boards (Elmore, 2000), these findings show how local control can be an effective democratic practice that shapes teaching and learning in public schools. The fierce protection of local control in rural communities may be justified, as these case studies show how school boards can facilitate democratic community engagement in schooling practices.

By comparing two rural districts in the same multi-district supervisory union, this research revealed the extent to which local communities shape their schooling. Prior research on educational governance and local control consistently identifies district leadership as the primary drivers for educational programs and practices (Elmore, 2000; Peuarch et al., 2020). Both Appleton and Oxford were part of the same MDSU, with a common superintendent, central office, and SU-wide governing board. Despite the districts' similarities, however, they enacted significantly different fiscal priorities for their respective public schools. Oxford, a fiscally conservative ski mountain town, voted to implement a global education program that reinforces the community's economic priorities. Appleton, a socially liberal college town, approved a significant tax increase to protect small class sizes and creative courses that aligned with the community's progressive values. The enactment of different priorities was controlled locally, by the school boards, community members, principals, and school staff.

One of the significant findings of this research is that the locally controlled school boards enacted elements of democratic, community-centered governance. These findings offer a counter-

narrative to the field of non-rural scholarship asserting local control is obsolete and school boards are not democratic (e.g., Malen, 2003; Scribner, 2016; Ziegler, 1973).

One such contradiction is that community participation was not solely enacted through a competitive electoral process. Between 2012 and 2022, Oxford's board only turned over two members. Appleton experienced more transitions, due in part to the transition to a five-member board in 2016, yet the majority of board members in the study either ran unopposed or were appointed to vacant positions. Nationally, declining community participation in school board governance has been an ongoing concern among educational researchers (Alsbury, 2008; Collins, 2021). Scholars assert a lack of competition in school board elections is evidence they are undemocratic and fail to ensure community representation in district governance (Wirt & Kirst, 1989; Zeigler et al., 1974).

In this study, the case study sites had low board turnover as well as low attendance at most board meetings. Annual town meetings and the pre-meeting informational sessions had higher turnout, but even that increased participation was limited to approximately 10% of the total town population. All board members expressed discomfort over small audience turnout as a possible indicator of the lack of democratic community engagement. Reflecting the feelings of board members of both districts, Oxford's board chair shared:

> We like people coming to our meetings. We like to talk to them. We like to have as many people on the team as possible. But, you don't get a lot of people at the meetings, so we kind of view that as a good sign that we're not pissing people off.

While the board chair was discussing meeting attendance, his assessment appears to align with research on school board elections. Alsbury (2008) and Lutz & Iannaccone (1994, 2008) assert the punctuated equilibrium of voter participation is a normal part of the democratic process. Called dissatisfaction theory (Lutz & Iannaccone, 1994), it describes the phenomenon where school board elections are largely uncontested until voters become dissatisfied, which prompts significant board turnover (Alsbury, 2003, 2008). In these case study sites, "not pissing people off" is another way of explaining low attendance may be due to community satisfaction with board governance.

Community attendance at meetings is not the only option for democratic participation in school governance. Both case study sites provided multiple opportunities for, as Gutmann states, "voters [to] have relatively easy access to information about the school board's policies and how the schools are run on the basis of those policies," (2001, p.73). Oxford's school board, for example, created detailed documents and budget breakdowns, based on community feedback and common questions, which established trust. "I think the voters have a lot of confidence in us," Oxford's board chair explained, a sentiment repeated by the majority of Oxford participants. Locally controlled school boards may offer multiple access points for community participation. Deliberative democracy requires community participation, but it does solely come from formalized processes of governance, like elections. "The closer you are to voters, I think the better decisions you make," Appleton's chair explained.

The findings also show each board enacted majoritarian educational programs, but there is insufficient data to assess the perspectives of minoritized community members. The lack of racial diversity in the case study districts also obscures historical marginalization of minoritized groups in democratic processes. It is therefore critical to build on work by Sampson (2018, 2019), to examine how community diversity relates to access and voice in rural school board governance. This line of research can expand and improve practices of democratic governance in boards to ensure all communities have access and voice in the governance of their public schools.

The case study sites therefore reflect one type of local control enacted by small, rural districts with a local school and a remote superintendent. Gutmann (2001) advises, "To preserve the

benefits of local control, school districts must be kept small enough for effective democratic control to be possible" (p. 75). Yet rural communities encompass many different organizational structures; many rural boards represent multiple schools and communities diffusely spread across large districts. Additionally, many non-rural communities want to increase local control (Jacobsen & Saultz, 2012). Additional research on the scope and variations of the enactment of local control is needed to expand this field of scholarship.

Some findings from this study can be used to increase democratic engagement for these different types of local school boards. For example, Appleton's strategies to hold meetings at various times and days could bring more residents to meetings. During the pandemic, both Appleton and Oxford moved all meetings online, which significantly increased attendance. The essential work of both boards, however, was to persistently engage in active outreach to communicate and connect with community members. This is a critical element to developing long-term community buy-in and support for district governance: by maintaining an open system of community meetings, the foundation is there for participation in times of crisis and conflict.

The school budgeting process also illustrated multiple pathways to enact local control. Oversight of district budgets is a fundamental role all school boards retain, regardless of their autonomy (Land, 2002; Weiss et al., 2018). In larger districts, teams of administrators develop budgets, with final oversight from school boards. Multiple elements of the budget are non-negotiable, such as contracts, salaries, federal and state grants. However, there are elements of school budgets that address the technical core of education, including professional development, instructional materials, specialist programs, and so forth. These elements provide opportunities for board members to collaborate with administrators about these programs, learn how they are implemented, and ask why they are priorities for the school. In turn, the school board can communicate these priorities with the broader community to identify what programs may be particularly valued, or worthy of expanding. In sum, the aspects of the budget that directly shape teaching, learning, and school culture can be used as leverage points for democratic school board and community engagement.

This is not to say that school boards should micromanage budgetary elements; all educational administrators and board members were clear on the limits to the budget negotiations. Instead, elements of the budget can be used as opportunities for discourse that deepens understanding of educational practices and priorities between the school board, school administrators, and the community at large. Research by Mountford (2004, 2008) and Trujillo (2013) document how school board members, as non-professionals in educational settings, lack necessary understanding to make informed decisions about educational practices. The budget approval process could offer a practical opportunity for school board members to learn from educational leaders about school and district priorities, developing board capacity.

Democratic governance of education can be messy, and is prone to conflict (Ferrare & Phillippo, 2021; Wirt & Kirst, 1989). One other glaring contradiction is that the case study boards were not engaged in conflict with each other, or with their communities. Even during waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, board members and the superintendent reported only minor community conflict. Yet across the nation, school board meetings became flashpoints for conflict (Ferrare & Phillippo, 2021), prompting the National School Board Association [NSBA] to request assistance from federal law enforcement (NSBA, 2021). It is difficult to imagine the practices of Oxford and Appleton could transfer to school boards and communities engaged in the ongoing conflict documented by the NSBA (2021), and I do not suggest that school boards can eliminate conflict or debate. However, this study centers on what locally controlled boards can do well and creates a path forward for improving the practices of school boards and their community relationships. It would also be useful for future research to examine the relationship between political climate and

democratic community governance of schools, as well as to examine the deliberative structures in place in areas with increased tension and conflict.

Conclusion

"Local school boards are the crucible of democracy," note Lutz and Iannaccone (2008, p. 5). School boards play a critical role in ensuring communities have a voice in the governance and practices of their schools. Yet educational research on school boards points to how they are undemocratic and disempowered (Danzberger, 1994; Trujillo, 2013; Wirt & Kirst, 1989). This article takes a different perspective by examining the work of empowered, locally controlled school boards to understand how they can be used as models to increase democratic participation in less autonomous districts. The article's findings expand the theoretical understanding of locally controlled school boards through detailed analysis of the democratic practices of two rural communities. Second, the study also shows how locally controlled school boards can influence and reinforce the technical core of schooling. Third, the study expands understanding of community engagement with local school governance, and provides strategies boards can employ to increase communication, transparency, and participation with community residents.

Education remains one of the foremost educational institutions in which we can and should participate. These local school boards demonstrate the importance of keeping some aspects of school governance – particularly the budget – local, and how these processes can ultimately benefit all communities. By increasing access to and participation in governance, school boards truly become the democratic institutions they were intended to be.

Acknowledgements

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