

*Difficult Ground: Community Leaders and School Board  
Service in Kentucky, 1997*

*Report on Focus Groups and Interviews*

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This report includes information gathered in two ways: from four focus groups composed of identified community leaders, and from 21 telephone interviews with present and former school board members. The four groups had much in common, as reflected in the extent of agreement on many topics described in this report. Each group also had distinctive characteristics that reflect local circumstances. Where appropriate, strong regional differences are pointed out, but in addition it is important to note the four groups differed in the concerns or issues that were more or less central to their specific conversations.

**Eastern Kentucky** ~~ People in this group came, with one exception, from one county. They focused predominately on what they perceive as the intrusion of tightly controlled, sometimes corrupt local politics into school board races and operations, and the difficulty -- indeed the risks -- of challenging the reigning political powers.

**Northern Kentucky** ~~ Because of physical proximity and a sense that Northern Kentucky is a distinctive geographic region, each participant was familiar with a number of school districts in addition to his or her own. Among them they had information about or first hand experience with the three county districts (Boone, Campbell, Kenton) and the numerous independent districts within those counties. This group talked more than others about the differences among school boards, and the way such factors as size, demographics of the communities served by the systems, and the individual history of each board are reflected in its practices and public perceptions about it.

**South Central Kentucky** ~~ Here a set of concerns served as an undercurrent or backdrop for consideration of issues. These concerns were about the changes to boards brought about by KERA, in particular the shift of power from the boards to school councils and the anti-nepotism ruling.

**Western Kentucky** ~~ This group had the most balance in its conversation, with no one theme dominating.

Although each of these four regional groups appeared to view school boards -- and public education -- through a slightly different lens, they shared strongly similar responses to most research topics. The remaining sections describe the composite findings from the four groups of community leaders, with a special note at any point where a regional or group difference is pronounced. Results from interviews with experienced board members are noted when they provide additional perspectives or support for

specific views. For ease of reference, where distinctions between the two categories exist, “community leaders” refers to people who were in the focus groups, and “board members” refers to the present and former board members interviewed by telephone.

The findings are organized in the following sections:

- Key findings about school board service
  - The role of school boards
  - Difficulties of school board service
  - Rewards of school board service
- Key findings about expanding the pool of candidates
  - Identifying and influencing community leaders to serve on school boards
  - Factors affecting decisions to run
  - Participants’ recommendations
- Conclusion

Most of the views of community leaders and experienced school board members presented in this study reflect experiences within the small and mid-sized school districts that are typical of most of Kentucky. Appendix A presents information from interviews suggesting that perceptions of successful school board service and individual decisions about school board service may be quite different in Kentucky’s very large districts.

Appendix B describes the methodology used in the study.

Appendix C offers a closer look at the demographics of participants in the interviews and focus groups.

## **KEY FINDINGS ABOUT SCHOOL BOARD SERVICE**

### **The Role of School Boards**

Participants generally agree that the role of the school board should be to provide leadership, serve as a sounding board, and set overall policy and guidelines for the district. Additionally, they view school boards as having the main responsibility to ensure that the superintendent does a good job managing the system and setting its management direction.

Participants in Western Kentucky emphasized that a school board should be visionary and progressive in its outlook. One participant said, to general agreement, that a board member should be “...someone who can look beyond the bounds of this community and see what else is going on in the rest of the world, learn about it, and bring it back in.” [Western Kentucky, p.13]

Most people feel that boards tend to stray from these primary responsibilities; they get into some administrative micro-managing, or they respond to the specifics of issues affecting constituents in the communities they represent. Participants believe that local politics, favoritism, and personal agendas also interfere with board members’ larger responsibilities.

Although some community leaders say they need to know more about school boards’ true responsibilities and the extent of a boards’ authority, many believe they have a reasonable level of understanding of what serving on a school board is like for individual board members. In the groups and interviews, participants focused primarily on difficulties, hardships, challenges, and barriers. People see these difficulties:

- too much to do
- too much to learn about and understand
- too much controversy and pressure
- not enough support
- miscommunication between the board and the public
- frustration due to inability to make a difference
- too much under the influence of politics

The following sections look at each of these difficulties in more detail.

Often the first response people gave when asked for general thoughts about school board service had to do with concerns about the time the work requires. They view as massive and overwhelming the amount of time that school board service takes and believe that the work is hard to do well even when one devotes a great amount of time to it. The tasks people cited as time-consuming include:

- the amount of information that must be absorbed about the district

## **Difficulties of School Board Service**

### *Too much to do*

- the extent of learning about federal and state requirements and prohibitions
- the numbers of meetings to be attended
- the need to communicate with constituents
- the need to visit schools

People say the massive demands on time and energy are off-putting to many potential candidates for school board positions, and daunting to those already serving. Experienced board members talked about a commitment of 10-20 hours a week, which often requires them to cut back on all of their other commitments to their community and to their churches.

*Too much to learn about and understand*

Many people in the focus groups said the amount of rules, regulations, and laws school board members are required to learn is intimidating, and they imagined it would take a long time before they would be able to comprehend this information well enough to function competently. Board members reflected the same sentiment when talking about their experience of service.

*Too much controversy and pressure*

Participants generally agreed that communities are likely to be split down the middle on any given topic, so that whatever their board decides, at least half the people are going to find fault or criticize. One person interviewed said that serving on a school board involves more controversy than serving on a city council or a town council because almost all issues that come before the school board are like zoning issues, which are highly emotional, personalized, highly volatile, and time-consuming. Others concurred that the emotionally challenging aspect of school board issues often interferes with the objectivity of both board members and the general public. One person commented, "...one of the things that scared me away from being a board member is that I didn't feel like I had the necessary separation to make the type of decisions necessary, without getting bombarded on all fronts from an emotional standpoint." [Northern Kentucky, p.11]

Community leaders agreed that people are often negative about their elected representatives no matter what their function, and this sentiment applies to school board members as well. In addition, community leaders suggest that community members fail to understand that school boards are dealing with difficult issues and that individual community members should not expect that the school board will always make decisions exactly as they wish. One person said: "They take a lot of heat..." [Western Kentucky, p.1] Another compared it to being "In a fish bowl with people

shooting at you...” [Western Kentucky, p.15] Another person asked rhetorically: “If you’re in business, can you afford to do it if you know that it’s going to be a controversial term?” [Western Kentucky, p.31]

Some focus group participants also imagined they would encounter parents who would want them to solve their children’s individual problems and who would expect board members to intervene in all levels of school activities. Other community leaders envisioned constant calls from disgruntled school employees and constituents, some of them focused on highly personal or highly petty matters. Here are some responses that reflect what community leaders imagine about serving on a board:

A nightmare. Frustrating. I’d take my phone off the hook. [South Central Kentucky, p.12-13]

There would be intense pressure, because in order for the change to take place, if this were an ideal school board that I’m imagining, [if] there were people like us on the school board, the pressure from the people would be very intense, because they are so used to the way it is. [Eastern Kentucky, p.13-14]

Never making a decision that anybody’s happy with. [Western Kentucky, p.15]

Experienced board member comments reflect that these fears are well-founded. Several of those interviewed discussed the potential risks for business owners as a result of their service on a board, with such negative impacts as loss of customer patronage. One woman interviewed mentioned that even her children and husband have taken some flack because of her decisions as a school board member. Many of these past and present board members also said they got a lot of evening or weekend calls and were approached on school matters when shopping or attending community events.

People feel that there is little or no support from the community to counter or balance the negative pressure. School board members take public risks when they make decisions guaranteed to anger some people, yet there is virtually no balancing sense of public support for the difficulty of the work. Community members seem to pay attention only to the specific issues that matter to them, and on these issues they expect board members to support the “right” positions or lose the support of their constituents. One participant felt frustrated that the public shows interest in the school board

*Not enough support*

during times of controversy but fails to lend support to the board on day-to-day issues: "...I wish somebody would just show up once in a while and express some interest. You feel like you're functioning in a vacuum." [Western Kentucky, p.25] People expressed general agreement with comments like "I think it's a thankless job." [Northern Kentucky, p.1], and "Yeah, I think it's a thankless job, truthfully. A very necessary job, but...you don't get a lot of pats on the back." [Western Kentucky, p.17]

*Miscommunication between the board and the public*

Both community leaders and experienced board members report that a great deal of miscommunication exists between school boards and the public. This was a recurring theme especially in the interviews, where past and present board members discussed the current discrepancies between the perceived authority of the board and the actual authority of the board. Board members say the community does not truly understand the responsibilities of school board members or the limits on their authority, but is quick to blame them for decisions over which they exercise no control, such as the hiring and firing of teachers. On the other hand, board members say many members of the community believe that the school board does not demonstrate enough accountability for its actions.

Public misperceptions and the problems associated with this breakdown in understanding and communication between the board and the public repeatedly surface as one of the challenges of serving on a school board. Many experienced board members blame the media for the perpetuation of these misconceptions. They believe that the media present an extremely negative view of school boards and therefore adversely affect the image of boards in the public eye. A few focus group participants, however, place the blame for inadequate communication on a lack of trust and on the inaccessibility of some school board members.

*Frustration due to inability to make a difference*

Community leaders expressed four main reasons for feelings of not being able to make a difference: board members are not aligned with each other; resources are limited; change takes so long to show results; and crucial power has shifted from boards to school councils. Experienced board members described the frustration that comes from winning a seat on the board, having progressive views and considerable energy, but being stymied because other board members or, in some cases, the district administration, are not aligned with them. One community leader, imagining what that experience would be like, said: "...what would be very frustrating, would be to be very ineffective, and to want what you

think is best for a district and then have two or three other board members that don't even look at that..." [Eastern Kentucky, p.23] Another participant raised this question:

How many of you all have served on a board or a committee that, when you really look at it pretty hard, if you weren't there it wouldn't make any difference? And I wonder how many people visualize or see a school board position as being somewhat of that. [Western Kentucky, p.34]

Experienced board members also reported becoming frustrated once they understood the limited flexibility that school districts have even within what seem to be large budgets. Some board members became discouraged because they could not locate or generate the necessary resources to address pressing issues or concerns that mattered a great deal to them. One community leader said: "...the hardest thing to do would [be to] know and see the things that need to be done and not have the means to do it..." [Northern Kentucky, p.20]

Community leaders and experienced board members identified the slow pace of change in school settings as particularly challenging to change-oriented board members, since it can take 12-16 years to begin to have a sense of the impact of some decisions on young peoples' capabilities. One person put it this way: "...it is a frustrating issue that you do your time and you don't see the results of it." [Western Kentucky, p.29] People in all categories of the study reported that it is difficult to find people willing to do the hard work of school board service with so little certainty that decisions are right, and with such unusual requirements of patience before knowing one has made a difference.

Some people in each group expressed dissatisfaction -- ranging from mild to extreme -- with the shift of authority and control from school boards to school councils. This view was reflected as well in a number of interviews. One person at the extreme end put it this way: "So when you [the school council] can change policies at one school out of ten or twenty, I don't see the point of a school board." [South Central Kentucky, p.2]

With minor exception, people indicated their distaste for the political aspects of board service. One part of that is the need to run for office. Another part is the actual politics of the board itself. Participants see having to run, having to raise money, and especially the risk of running and losing, as negative aspects.

*Too much under the influence of politics*

Many people voiced concerns that the school board is part of the “good old boy network” in their communities, in which only those with extensive political contacts can be elected consistently. One person put it this way:

If you wanted to get elected, all the people you would owe who helped you get elected, it would make whatever you thought probably ineffective, because if you wanted to get elected badly enough, you probably would have to sell your soul. [Eastern Kentucky, p.30]

Another participant said that “...there are no worse politics than local politics, and you can’t get any more local than school board politics, so, ergo, dirty politics at its best.” [South Central Kentucky, p.11]

In relation to internal board politics, one person said that school board service would be more attractive if he knew that he and the other members of the board were pretty much aligned in their thinking. Then he could look forward to reasonable debate and discussion and could enjoy working with the other board members in a situation of shared goals instead of polarization. No one perceived that alignment as a situation that prevails presently.

In sum, community leaders in the focus groups and many board members in the interviews devoted most of their comments to describing all the different types of difficulties, obstacles, barriers, and challenges presented in the above sections. The focus on difficulties was pronounced, and the sense that school board service is truly hard pervaded all conversations. Comments from some people in groups and interviews suggest they view school board service as so hard that the difficulty is overwhelming, insurmountable, and dispiriting. Still, when asked directly to consider the rewards associated with school board service, people had ready responses. These are addressed in the next section.

## **Rewards of School Board Service**

People associate some real satisfaction with serving on a school board. There was virtually unanimous agreement among both community leaders and experienced board members that the main reward from being on a school board comes from feelings of performing a vital service to the community. Participants also spoke about the rewards of community involvement, the ability to empower a school district, and making a positive difference in the lives of children. These themes were stated in many different ways.

...another rewarding part would be just to feel like you had done...this kind of civic duty or you had done your role as

far as a parent... [Western Kentucky, p.22]

I think it would be an exciting challenge to affect the education of the children in the county, and to rise to that challenge of raising their education level and their test scores to be more competitive. [Eastern Kentucky, p.17]

I think it would be rewarding if you could initiate a positive change, whatever that would be...shake things up, start something new, stimulate those children, get those children to want to come to school. [Northern Kentucky, p.18]

People were split, however, between those who believe it is still possible to make a difference and reap significant rewards from serving, and those who believe that present conditions make any sense of reward unlikely. The former sentiments tended to come from people who perceive their own communities and boards as less divided and in a less contentious situation than others.

Some of the participants believe a different set of rewards used to be connected to serving on a school board. They talked about how service on a board used to be seen as a stepping stone to other -- or higher -- political office. People generally agreed that not only is serving on school boards now not perceived as a stepping stone to a higher office, but that many people with political aspirations view it as a potential liability -- something that would hurt a career rather than help it. They believe some of the likely candidates for school board are people who in past times would have seen a school board position as a way to advance politically, but who now actively stay away from it because it no longer serves this function.

There were two exceptions to this general consensus. First, some of the Northern Kentucky participants believe that in smaller districts, where there is more direct contact with the community and less controversy, serving on a school board remains a way to gain positive recognition in the community. Second, one person in Eastern Kentucky still sees a close connection between school board service and other political offices in his county. He said: "When the president of the board moves to the county judge-executive directly, it should suggest something, shouldn't it?" [Eastern Kentucky, p.4]

Community leaders and board members both focused significantly more attention on the difficulties of school board service than on its rewards. Experienced board members, however, were more likely to emphasize that the rewards of service are genuine, and

## **KEY FINDINGS ABOUT EXPANDING THE POOL OF CANDIDATES**

satisfying.

In an effort to get community leaders to share more of their own thinking about ways to expand the pool of candidates, researchers asked the leaders to complete several tasks:

- Identify people in their own communities who seemed good potential candidates for school board and explain why they would be good
- Describe key factors they believe community leaders take into consideration when deciding whether to run for school board
- Recommend strategies that might influence community leaders to consider school board service in a more positive light
- Develop messages that might persuade community leaders to run

The results from this part of the research are presented in the following sections.

### **Identifying and Influencing Community Leaders to Serve on School Boards**

People in the groups had some difficulty in identifying real people in their communities who would make good school board members. One person said:

I've never sat down and thought, Who would be a good school board member? I do that every year at city and county commission time, but I've never really sat down and thought, Who would be a good school board member? [Western Kentucky, p.47]

Some of the pervasive pessimism about political conditions was reflected in one person's statement:

Personal qualifications have nothing to do with being elected to school board member, and so it's really hard to think of someone and actually think of them getting to the point of being a school board member. That's too big of a gap for me to cross. [Eastern Kentucky, p.10]

Participants were more comfortable talking about general

attributes. They stressed the need for community-minded people who are honest, fair, innovative, respected by others, and who possess good leadership qualities. All groups also emphasized the importance of finding people in the business, personnel, or management professions to serve on the school board. People see the need for these kinds of people to serve on boards for a number of reasons:

- the general complexity of dealing with a large bureaucracy, especially understanding the budget;
- the abundance of state and federal mandates and regulations;
- the changes initiated with KERA, especially the sharing of authority with school councils.

Participants in all four groups expressed this desire for more business-oriented people in various ways.

...it would be kind of nice to have a businessperson.  
[Western Kentucky, p.14]

...somebody that's been successful in business, that has gone out, tried it, fallen and failed, got back up and did it and managing work with people... [South Central Kentucky, p.10]

...someone who...has the accounting skills... [Eastern Kentucky, p.9]

People had differences of opinion concerning the desirable education level for board members. Some people in each focus group stated that school boards should be composed of people with the most education in their communities. In two groups and some interviews, on the other hand, people observed that this view eliminates or intimidates those who feel unqualified to run because they lack any formal education beyond high school, even though they possess the inner drive and perhaps the leadership experience. One participant said: "The thing that would hold me up from running for school board is that I am only a high school graduate; therefore, I don't feel qualified to...deal with these learned people." [Northern Kentucky, p.30]

The group in Northern Kentucky discussed the possibility of introducing competency tests for board members, with the aim of attracting well-educated leaders. Participants in South Central Kentucky and Western Kentucky spoke of the need to look for

different kinds of people in the community who would be willing to make a difference, not just those with the highest levels of education or the most personal connections.

Some differences of opinion also emerged regarding the desirability of personal agendas, the inclusion of more senior citizens on boards, and the importance of members with children in the school system. While many focus group participants see personal agendas on the part of board members as detrimental to the effectiveness of the board and as something that impedes progress, others recognize that most people in the community need to have a burning issue that compels them to seek the position of board member.

Some participants said that school boards need to include more senior citizens, citing the fact that retired persons generally have more time for service as well as more experience in their communities. While no participants disputed the value of including senior citizens on the board, some said it is more important to appeal to the younger members of the community, who may be more in touch with the current changes occurring in Kentucky education and who may be more enthusiastic about these changes.

Similarly, there was no general consensus among the groups on the issue of whether it is preferable to have people on the board who have children presently in the school system. Those who support the notion that board members should have children in school believe that parents are most in touch with the school system and therefore in the best position to make decisions and judgments about the needs of the district. Participants who disagree believe that having board members with no children would remove a significant element of personal bias from school board work.

Some of the focus group participants and many current board members stressed that unopposed or uncontested seats are not necessarily a cause of concern. Rather, they believe that in some communities these trends reflect public satisfaction with the present school board members. These participants emphasized that in many instances the stability of a board greatly enhances its effectiveness and its relationship with the community.

In the focus groups and in the interviews, when researchers asked how to make running for and serving on the board more attractive to people who have been identified as good potential candidates, there was always a pause. No one had a quick response. The

## Factors Affecting Decisions to Run

pause was sometimes followed by a verbal acknowledgment, such as “That’s a hard question.” In the focus groups, people seemed to be hesitating and thinking, and generally looked puzzled. This suggests that people not only do not have ready answers, but that they have not thought about this question before. They have not thought about how things could be improved to make life easier and better for people who serve on school boards, and hence make service more attractive.

When people did begin talking about the question, a thorough understanding of the job, a reformulation of the election process, and changes in public perception and support surfaced as the most important factors that could make a positive impact when community leaders consider whether to run for a school board position. Many of the participants said potential candidates would also need to feel that they would be able to make a real difference in their school system and would be able to form a coalition with other members to move their district successfully forward, instead of being subjected to political infighting. Some believe that a workable arrangement between the school board and the site-based councils would make it more likely that community leaders would consider serving on the school board.

Participants in the Eastern Kentucky group were pessimistic about the possibility of altering the larger political landscape. They believe school boards are highly political and tied into what participants view as the prevailing power structure. They believe that getting elected to a board in their communities thus requires an alliance with one or another of the political factions in the community. These participants consider this detrimental to the effective functioning of the school board as well as to the potential for attracting new board members, but they see no way to work on changing these conditions without a great deal of either personal risk or great difficulty.

Participants in other groups also believe that the election process scares a lot of people off and that local politics and favoritism influence lesser known people in the community not to run. One person said: “...the political aspect of it still turns me off.” [Northern Kentucky, p.34] Another person said: “I think there are a lot of people that would be qualified for public service that just...are not going to expose themselves and their family to what they consider to be private scrutiny...” [Western Kentucky, p.20] The time commitment resurfaced in all four groups as a major factor negatively affecting peoples’ decision about whether to run for a seat on the school board. Lack of support also resurfaced. One person said: “I’d like to know that there were people out there

who would give me an honest opinion, whether they agreed with me or not, and help me make good decisions.” [Eastern Kentucky, p.37]

A sizable segment of people in the groups and in the interviews cited the changes that have come about because of KERA as a reason people choose not to seek a school board position. At least one person in each group saw the reduction in the board’s scope of authority and consequent loss of power when KERA was enacted as the most important factor affecting negatively the satisfaction possible from serving on a board and, as a result, peoples’ decisions about running for school board. Those who hold this view of the board’s diminished power believe that significant authority has been taken away from the boards and that serving on a board is not as rewarding as it might have been in the past because boards cannot make decisions that directly affect individual schools’ functioning. Here are two representative comments.

I think of a group that’s floundering because they have lost all their power to the site-based councils. [Western Kentucky, p.1]

I think, probably, today the biggest challenge, to me, would be trying to operate a school district with two policy-making boards or bodies. The district board may be setting policy, but the school’s site-based councils are setting the tones and directions of individual schools, and I see a big lack of the desire of school boards and site-based councils truly wanting to deal with each other... [South Central Kentucky, p.23]

While a number of people said that having no power over hiring was a loss to the boards, many of the community leaders and experienced board members said that removing hiring is an advantage. People said that not being involved in hiring took away something that they would just as soon not include in board responsibilities.

Another KERA change drew comments in three of the groups. In the Eastern Kentucky and South Central Kentucky groups, and to a lesser extent in the Northern Kentucky group, people talked about how the anti-nepotism provision in KERA rules out some of the most likely candidates for school boards, people whose families are highly involved in education but who cannot serve on a school board because members of their family are employed by the local district. One Eastern Kentucky participant put it this way:

Well, in our small economic base, if you have an education in Eastern Kentucky, you're going to work with the school system, very likely, because it's going to be one of the biggest employers, and so that law does hurt us, probably more than it does urban areas. [Eastern Kentucky, p.30]

When asked for their advice about ways to encourage people to run, many people talked about providing more information to the public about what school boards actually do, as well as providing more support and more training for the people who are already in those positions. One person made the following suggestion: "Maybe brainstorming in the community among a diverse number of people with different backgrounds and different talents and perspectives." [Western Kentucky, p.48] Another said:

Maybe we ought to look at the responsibility kind of from a different perspective. If none of us are willing to accept this responsibility, and most of the people we know are not willing to accept this responsibility, are we then willing to give up the voice of the people? Maybe we should look at that. Maybe that question should be posed to people like us. [Western Kentucky, p.48]

Some people recommended the creation of "how-to kits" that would describe and define the duties and responsibilities of school board members in great detail, thus alleviating some popular misconceptions. Other participants mentioned the possibility of handing out fliers or creating a school board Web page.

When people talked about the need for more information on school board roles and responsibilities, their comments covered the whole spectrum of the previous discussion. Some participants suggested that school boards need to educate the general public about what they do. Most participants agree that there is a need for the role and responsibilities of the school board to be clearly defined so that potential candidates would know the parameters and limitations of the job before they become involved. Most also believe that, in general, more interaction between members of the school board, community leaders, and the local community at large would be useful and valued. Some participants focused on the importance of accountability, to ensure that the school board members meet community needs rather than serve a more personal agenda. The following statements capture these sentiments.

## **Participants' Recommendations**

And I think you'd have to educate and reassure the general populace that these changes will not hurt them, that it will improve their life, it will improve the education for their children, and that the school board will be accessible to them...[Eastern Kentucky, p.42]

I think the idea of bringing a group of people like this together...to sit down at the local level and brainstorm, toss out names, ideas, kind of sift through the community, and come up with some people that would be good board members, and then as a group say, "We think you would be a good board member"... [Western Kentucky, p.47]

How-to kits. Then you could say, this is it, here's how you do it, and I'm going to help you, and I know a lot of other people who will help you, too... [Western Kentucky, p.50]

...explain to the community what, actually, the responsibilities are. [South Central Kentucky, p.39]

Another suggestion related to the need for more diversity on the boards themselves, representing different aspects of the community. This would involve having a greater diversity of races, gender, ages, and educational/professional backgrounds. One Western Kentucky participant said:

We're all from a class that we make sure our children have all the opportunities that we can provide for, but there's a whole other class of people. I really think that somebody like [NAME DELETED], who is a black woman, came from an upbringing where she was very poor, did not have the clothing to wear to school and so on... I would see someone like her would bring a perspective to what do the children need, the ones that weren't her children. [Western Kentucky, p.12]

### **Message to convey**

Researchers asked the community leaders and experienced board members for suggestions about what to say to encourage increased numbers of capable people to serve on school boards. Responses fell into three categories: "You can make a difference;" "We'll provide steady support for you;" and "There are some rewards." Here is more detail about the messages people thought might appeal to community leaders.

### Make a difference

Most experienced board members report that they sought the office because of the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of children and, by extension, in the life of the whole community. Similarly, community leaders suggested that the chance to make a positive change held some appeal for them. Community leaders suggested emphasizing the opportunity to make a difference as one of the themes most likely to resonate with qualified potential candidates. Here are some representative suggestions.

You're going to change lives, the quality of life of children... [Eastern Kentucky, p.38]

...the thing of it is, if they make a difference in just one child's life by being a member on that school board, that's one person, and it's well worth it for that. [Northern Kentucky, p.43-44]

...it's an opportunity to take place in some sort of systemic change in our own state.  
[Northern Kentucky, p.46]

### Support

In some of the groups and some of the interviews people spoke about how much more appealing school board service would be and how much more willing community leaders would be to run if they could be assured of the steady, consistent support of a group of people whose opinions they valued. These supporters would be people who believe strongly in competent school board members, and are willing to invest some of their own time and energy in making school board service more manageable. One person said: "We have to support them and do those things, but I think we also need to make them understand that we back off and let them make the decisions..." [Western Kentucky, p.52] Another said: "But you also have to say, 'I want you on there and I'm willing to help you get there'." [Western Kentucky, p.43]

Suggestions about support include strategies that go beyond messages alone and would require the creation of new community structures and habits.

### Rewards of service

Community leaders and experienced board members suggest that Kentuckians may respond to messages that emphasize the value or virtue of service. Though messages of this sort are not common in public life today, people participating in this study believe Kentucky community leaders have either the life experience or training to find messages about the importance of community service compelling. One person said:

...I would like to see the human side or the personal side of current school board members, the enthusiasm, the personal story, which I don't think any of us have really heard, of why people want to serve, what achievements and good feelings they've got from serving as school board members. [Western Kentucky, p.46]

## CONCLUSION

The first point to be made in conclusion is about what people did **not** say. No participants suggested at any point that the matter before them -- encouraging more community leaders to run for the school board -- is not important. The underlying -- and unspoken -- assumption shared by all participants is that school boards provide a crucial service to the community. The line of argument is that the quality of the school boards directly affects the quality of the schools, and the quality of the school system directly affects the quality of the community. This shared sense, this implicit belief, is paired with a second set of underlying assumptions: that school boards are not as strong and effective as they could be, that school board service is almost impossibly challenging, and that too few skilled leaders are eager to run for school board positions.

These two commonly held sets of assumptions combine to create a sense of frustration, confusion, and discouragement that pervaded the conversations in the four groups. Most participants feel that major changes are necessary to improve the reputation, perception, and substance of school board service. Most feel that these changes will be hard to accomplish.

The changes would include: more support and understanding from the community; modifying the election process; broadening public perceptions of who qualifies as an appropriate school board member; clarifying the defined role and responsibilities of board members; improving the relationship between the school board and the site-based councils; improving the actual effectiveness of a school board; and getting a critical mass of well motivated, effective members on the board, so that joining with them seems

attractive to others.

Above all, participants offered insight into the present diminishing appeal of school board service in their local communities and the need to review the entire process with an eye to developing strategies to address the problems that many associate with school boards at this time. These problems include overwhelming time and learning demands, power struggles, private agendas, and inefficiency. The main challenge is to reverse the cycle of pessimism -- most obvious in Eastern Kentucky, but reflected in comments in all groups -- about being able to be effective, and able to make a positive difference in the resolution of chronic problems. One participant expressed the nature of the problem this way:

Several years ago I was approached by a number of people to run, and spoke to our superintendent about it. At the time, he was a very dear friend of mine, and he wisely advised me if I did, that my life would be changed forever, and I talked to...I had several friends on the school board at that time and just decided no, that just...it's absolutely a thankless job, because even if you do create policy that certainly helps the children or whatever, there are numerous parents that disagree with that, and those are the ones you hear from. You don't hear from the ones who...where you've done something that's good.  
[Northern Kentucky, p.15]

This research project asked participants to perform an unfamiliar task — envisioning ways to change both entrenched community habits and hard-to-change institutional policies based on law and on decades of practice. Few community leaders or school board members included in this study could envision any entity that might take on the work of revamping community leaders' commitment to their school boards and also addressing the need to reshape school board service itself so that the work is more manageable.

Many participants suggested that civic-minded individuals have a willingness to serve their community, but that the inherent structure of the school system and related perceptions of school boards often interfere. The challenge is to harness the good will and interest that exist and support those who seek to serve their communities by becoming school board members. It seems clear from the conversations in this study that no single community can tackle the enormity of this challenge alone. The communities will need to be linked and led by a thoughtful statewide effort across a significant time frame.

## **APPENDICES**

## **APPENDIX A**

### **Scale of System as a Factor**

Most of the difficulties and rewards of school board service, along with participants' ideas for making service more attractive, stem from experience in school districts outside the Commonwealth's two largest urban areas, Louisville and Lexington-Fayette County. Each of the five board members in these two densely populated areas has a much larger pool of constituents to represent than in any other part of Kentucky. As a result, the experiences and views of board members with experience in an urban area need to be considered separately.

This study included interviews with seven present and former board members of the Fayette County Public School System. These interviews, taken as a body, tell a somewhat different story than the one that unfolded in the focus groups, in part because the Fayette County Public Schools district is so large that it presents special challenges to board members.

The people interviewed in Lexington fall into two distinct categories. Those in one category served either before 1990 or slightly later. They cited difficulties and frustrations, but also said they felt they had an impact and made a difference in some way through their service. These same people tend to be negative or skeptical about KERA, resent one or another of the reform manifestations, or are directly affected by them, such as the anti-nepotism ruling. The people who served in the last four to six years, with rare exceptions, are mildly to strongly negative about their service. They cite the time that it cost them, their inability to accomplish anything, and their lack of support in the community.

In contrast, several interviews with people in the smaller systems in other parts of the state suggest that those systems are more manageable. The board members in these districts cited rewards as often as frustrations and seem to feel more connected to their constituents, their community, and most importantly, their schools. In spite of all the expressed difficulties, they feel they can get something done, especially with regard to the progress of students. All in all, those serving in smaller districts held a more positive view of the possibilities for school board service and of their own experiences on boards.

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Methodology**

#### A. BACKGROUND

In September, 1997 the researchers conducted four focus groups for the Partnership for Kentucky Schools and the Kentucky School Boards Association. Focus groups met at the following locations in Kentucky: Northern Kentucky, Owensboro, Paintsville, and Stanford. Each drew participants from a multi-county area. The researchers also conducted telephone interviews with present and former school board members spread across the state.

#### B. PURPOSE

The researchers used the focus groups and interviews to explore views held by community leaders and experienced school board members about ways to enhance the attractiveness of school board service and encourage more community leaders to seek the office.

#### C. FORMAT

A total of 31 community leaders participated in four focus groups, each of which lasted approximately two hours. A facilitator led each focus group, asking participants questions about the following topics:

- Their views on the role of school boards in their communities and what school boards should do
- Their thoughts on people in their communities who would make good school board members and what characteristics made such people attractive as board members
- Their impressions of service on a school board, including rewards and challenges
- Their assessment of those factors that people consider when deciding whether or not to seek a position on the school board, and what barriers prevent capable people from running
- Their suggestions concerning ways to encourage more people to run for school board positions and the conditions that need to be satisfied before more people will consider running for the office

The researchers designed the focus group questions to elicit statements reflecting the current perception of school boards and school board service in the participants' communities. The questions were framed in a way to gain an understanding of the present opinions of school board service and to elicit suggestions for improving the image and substance of school boards in the

future. The questions encouraged dialogue that revealed the attitudes and values underlying participants' opinions.

A total of 21 former and present school board members participated in the telephone interviews, each of which lasted approximately 15 to 20 minutes. The interviewer led each conversation, asking participants questions about the following topics:

- The factors that led them to run for a school board position and the reasons they may no longer be serving (where applicable)
- Their experiences with school board service and whether or not it matched their expectations
- Their impressions of the factors that community leaders most consider when deciding whether or not to run for school board
- Their suggestions concerning ways to increase the attractiveness of school board service and how to better understand community perceptions of service

The researchers designed the interviews to elicit statements about current and former board members' personal experiences with serving on a school board that could help the researchers understand the motivating factors that had led people to run. The questions also sought to gauge board members satisfaction with their service and their suggestions for ways to improve the relationship between school boards and the community.

#### D. PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT

A professional market research and opinion polling firm recruited a total of 59 participants for the focus groups, of whom 31 appeared and participated. Recruiters drew random samples from various lists of community leaders supplied by the sponsors. The names for the telephone interview participants were provided by the Kentucky School Boards Association.

The focus groups included people with leadership experience who had not run for or served on school boards in the past and were not public school employees. The interviews involved either present or former school board members.

#### E. CAUTION ABOUT GENERALIZING TO A LARGER POPULATION

This study, based on a set of focus groups and in-depth interviews, is a form of qualitative research, which permits exploration of opinions, values, attitudes, and perceptions of a relatively small number of people in some depth. Unlike quantitative research, which examines precise responses of a random sample of respondents in order to predict how larger populations would respond to the same questions, qualitative research aims to discover previously unknown opinion

patterns, describe points of view in detail, and generate insights based on lengthier investigations with a small number of people. The results of qualitative research cannot be used to predict the responses of larger populations with statistical accuracy. Instead, qualitative research results are intended to deepen understanding of complex issues, questions, and problems as a carefully selected cross-section of people see them.

**APPENDIX C  
Demographic Data**

**ALL FOCUS GROUPS**

	<b>Northern Kentucky</b>	<b>Owensboro</b>	<b>Paintsville</b>	<b>Stanford</b>	<b>Totals</b>
<b>GENDER</b>					
Females	5	7	5	1	18
Males	3	5	2	3	13
<b>RACE</b>					
Black	0	0	0	0	0
White	8	12	7	4	31
<b>AGE</b>					
18-24	0	0	0	0	0
25-34	0	0	1	0	1
35-44	1	4	2	1	8
45-54	4	8	3	3	18
55-64	0	0	1	0	1
65+	3	0	0	0	3

## ALL FOCUS GROUPS

	Northern Kentucky	Owensboro	Paintsville	Stanford	Totals
<b>Total household income</b>					
under \$20,000	0	0	0	0	0
\$20,000 to \$44,000	1	0	0	0	1
\$45,000 to \$60,000	1	1	5	2	9
\$60,000 to \$75,000	1	3	0	1	5
\$75,000 to \$100,000	3	5	1	1	10
Over \$100,000	0	1	1	0	2
Refused	2	2	0	0	4
<b>Highest level of education</b>					
High School	2	1	1	0	4
Technical/Vocational	1	0	0	0	1
Some College	1	2	2	1	6
College Graduate	0	1	1	2	4
Graduate/ Professional	4	8	3	1	16