Examining Latino Representation on California’s School Boards

It’s impact on perceptions of District problems, priorities, and policies

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California’s student population is increasingly becoming diverse, with Latinos now comprising around half of the total student population in the state. The political leadership in most school districts does not reflect this demographic shift, however. This lack of concomitant diversity among administrators can result in specific challenges for schools. Although school administrators are strongly sympathetic to the needs of all children, lack of diversity may limit the board’s ability to adequately represent the needs of the entire population they intend to serve. This could have direct policy impact if Latino board members see issues differently or have different priorities than white members.

Moreover, the level of Latino representation could have an impact on Latino students’ performance and on parental involvement in schools. If Latino board members are regarded as better able to engage Latino children and parents, then greater diversity on school boards could have an impact on the educational progress of one of the most disadvantaged populations in California.

Using secondary data from the census and the California Department of Education and an on-line web-based survey of school board trustees, we explored barriers to Latino representation on school boards, as well as trustee perceptions about a variety of policy issues in their districts.

We found that Latinos represent a relatively small proportion of school board members in California, only about 15%. Latino representation does increase along with the broader increase in the number of Latino students, but even so, a majority of districts where Latinos make up between half and two-thirds of the student body have no Latino trustees.
Bars to Representation

The Latino trustees we polled consistently pointed out a host of factors that constitute barriers to overcome in running for office: prominent among those factors are low voter turnout by Latinos; high numbers of district residents being ineligible to vote; and the high cost of competing in a school board election. They are also more likely to expressed having difficulty filing candidate papers and finding information about their district and policy options.

Moreover, the commonly used “at-large” system for school board elections might actually be limiting the number of Latinos making it onto school boards. Close to 20% of the Latino elected officials indicated that this system poses a barrier to more adequate representation, significantly more so than did their white counterparts.

Perceptions of problems and policies

All school board members are motivated to serve in that capacity because they feel a personal passion for seeing young people achieve their best. We found that Latino trustees, however, tend to be more concerned about specific issues such as raising the college-going rate of students of color and increasing the number of people of color who become trustees and teachers. There is strong evidence that Latino representation on school boards correlates with the districts’ proportion of bilingual teachers and the percent of Latino teachers, administrators, and student services employees such as counselors, librarians and nurses, even after controlling for the percent of Latinos in the district.

The ability of Latino board members to engender more influence on board’s priorities and policies may require that there is more than one Latino trustee serving. We found some support for this proposition. Board members (both white and Latino) on boards with more than one Latino trustee are slightly more likely to feel that dropout rates and college-going rates among students of color constitute a serious problem and a top priority in their districts. ■

Policy Recommendations

District voter registration and turnout

Particular efforts need to be directed towards increasing registration of eligible district voters and elevating voter turnout.

Candidate support & spending caps

Campaign spending caps could be an alternative to the high burden election costs puts on Latino candidates. More information and training might help with running for school boards, as well as more information about the district and policy options.

Non-citizen voting

Many of the Latino residents who are not registered to vote are ineligible because they are not as yet citizens, even while they might be legal permanent residents. Even though they cannot vote, they pay taxes and are obliged to have their children schooled. If permitted to vote in at least local school elections, non-citizens may also become more engaged with their schools and teachers and may increase Latino representation in school boards.

Further Analysis

There should be systematic analysis of school districts with high proportions of Latino residents and no Latino board members to determine whether structural barriers are impediment to electing Latino school board members in those districts.

The full report and technical notes are available for download at http://cci.sfsu.edu/schoolboards.