

Chapter 5

Summary, Conclusions, Discussion and Recommendations

The purpose of this chapter is to summarize the study that was conducted. Included in this summary are a review of the purpose of the study, a restatement of the research questions, the research methodology used, and a summary of the study results, conclusions and discussion. Recommendations for further research and possible studies conclude this chapter.

Summary

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of selected school board members regarding the quality and condition, maintenance, and improvement and renovation of existing public school facilities.

Restatement of Research Questions

The research questions for this study were: (1) How do selected school board members perceive the quality and condition of school facilities within their district? (2) How do selected school board members perceive the maintenance of existing public school facilities in their district? (3) What actions have been taken by selected school boards to address the improvement and renovation of existing school facilities?

Research Methodology

The researcher used descriptive research methodology and survey techniques to collect data from selected school board members across the country. Data collected from the survey respondents represented their perceptions regarding the quality and condition,

maintenance, and improvement and renovation of existing public school facilities within their district. Non-respondents were sent reminder letters and additional questionnaires following the initial mailing (Appendix G & H).

A coded stratified random sample was selected from the population of school board member subscribers to The American School Board Journal (Table 2). Respondents completed a survey questionnaire that addressed their perceptions regarding the quality and condition, maintenance, and improvement and renovation of existing public school facilities in their district (Appendix B). The sample in this study was disaggregated by region to address the fact that there is wide variance in the number of school board members within each of the nine geographical subgroups identified by the National School Board Association (Table 1). The numbers in the sample are based on studies by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) regarding sample size for research activities.

A description of the sample identified by geographic region is indicated in Table 2. A coded stratified random sample of 579 school board member subscribers to The American School Board Journal was utilized for this study. During the week of February 9, 1998, these selected school board members were mailed questionnaires, accompanied by a cover letter (Appendix D) and coded postage-paid, self-addressed return envelope (Appendix E). Recipients were requested to complete the questionnaire (Appendix B) and to return it to The American School Board Journal as soon as possible. One week later, a postcard reminder (Appendix F) was sent to each recipient of the questionnaire. Three weeks following the date of the initial cover letter, a follow-up letter (Appendix G) and a replacement questionnaire was mailed to all non-respondents. Six weeks following the date of the initial mailing, another replacement questionnaire and final letter (Appendix H) was sent to non-respondents. Over an eight-week period ending April 7, 1998, 294 surveys (50.8%) were returned and subsequently analyzed. Anecdotal comments appearing on surveys are reported in Appendix I.

Results

Of the total surveys analyzed, 6.1 percent were from the New England Region, 11.2 percent from the Middle Atlantic Region, 26.2 percent from the East North Central Region and 14.3 percent from the West North Central Region. Additionally, 10.5 percent

were from the South Atlantic Region, 4.4 percent from the East South Central Region, 8.2 percent from the West South Central Region, 9.9 percent from the Mountain Region and 8.5 percent from the Pacific Region (Table 3).

The distribution of returned surveys by community type were described in Table 4. The majority of the respondents indicated that their community could best be described as suburban (37.4 %). Next, 24.5 percent reported small town and 15.7 percent indicated a rural community. Only 7.1 percent of the respondents lived in an urban community.

Table 5 provided data relating to distribution of responses by a district's student enrollment. The highest response was from school board members whose districts ranged from 1,000 to 4,999 students (48.3%). The smallest response rate came from board members whose districts are greater than 25,000 students (6.1%).

The demographic and personal data reported by those who responded to the survey were provided in Table 6. The majority of the respondents were male (54.1%) Caucasians (81.3%). The largest percentage of respondents fell between the ages of 41-50 (46.6%), held advanced college degrees (40.5%), and earned incomes between \$90,000 and more than \$150,000 (38.4%). However, only 58.8 percent of the respondents reported having children in the public schools. When asked to classify themselves as politically conservative or liberal, 61 percent of the respondents reported themselves as conservative. More than 95 percent of the respondents serve on elected boards and 59 percent reported serving four-year terms.

Section One of the survey contained seven questions (1-7) that asked selected school board members to indicate their perceptions regarding the quality and condition of existing public school facilities in their district. Results indicated that the majority (61.2%) of the respondents reported their schools to be 25-50 years old. More than 78 percent indicated that their perceptions of the overall quality and condition of their schools were either better than adequate (43.2%) or adequate (35.4%). A majority, 59.5 percent, reported that they have a plan in place to evaluate the quality and condition of school facilities. The majority of the respondents (52.4%) also believed that school facilities in their district were safe and free to a great extent from environmental hazards. And once again, the majority (54.8%) of the respondents expressed the belief that most

school facilities meet the needs of the educational program in their district. When asked about the extent to which school facilities in the district are technologically adequate for the future, 43.9 percent indicated more than half were adequate. Almost two-thirds reported that their community was proud of the overall condition of its school facilities, with 27.9 percent reporting satisfaction to a great extent and 37.8 percent to a significant extent. The data show that more than three-fourths of the school board members who responded to the survey perceived the quality and condition of their schools as adequate or better, and that nearly two-thirds of these respondents saw their communities as proud of the quality and condition of its schools.

The survey contained seven questions (8-14) that asked selected school board members to indicate their perceptions regarding the maintenance of existing public school facilities in their district. Almost three-quarters of the respondents indicated that the maintenance of school facilities was one of their top priorities. A sizeable majority (70.4%) reported that less than 5 percent of the total school system budget was designated for this purpose. A smaller majority of the respondents (56.1%) expressed the opinion that the amount of money spent on maintenance was adequate. Approximately two-thirds of the respondents (65%) indicated that their school board is proactive in addressing the maintenance of school facilities. Almost half the respondents (48.7%) reported that primary responsibility for school facility maintenance belonged to the school district. The remainder was equally divided in assigning that responsibility to both the school district and state (24.2%) or to the school district, state and federal government (24.2%). More than two-thirds of the respondents (68.7%) indicated that school facility maintenance is more efficient and cost-effective when performed by a combination of school system personnel and outside contractors. The data also show that almost half (46.9%) of the respondents believed that the use of outside contractors for maintenance purposes should result in a reduction in school system facility support personnel. Almost twenty-eight percent (27.9%) responding to this question indicated that re-deployment of these personnel within the school system should occur.

Finally, the survey contained seven questions (15-21) that asked selected school board members to indicate their perceptions regarding actions taken by their boards to address the improvement and renovation of existing school facilities. Almost

sixty percent (59.5%) of the responding board members believed that they received enough information about the need to improve and renovate existing school facilities in order to make effective decisions. These respondents also clearly indicated that it was the superintendent and school system staffs who were the primary impetus for school board actions regarding the improvement and renovation of school buildings (82%). Almost sixty percent (59.5%) reported that their school board was implementing an approved plan to systematically address improvement and renovation issues in their district. However, the respondents were divided between adequate funding (48.3%) and a less than adequate amount (41.2%) when asked to give their opinion regarding the adequacy of money spent on improvement and renovation. The majority of board members (56.1%) reported a variety of response combinations to indicate what factors are the primary impetuses for decisions to improve and renovate school facilities in their districts. Within these combinations, the largest group of respondents (7.1%) expressed concerns about technology and school building quality and condition. Another 5.8 percent added changes in the educational program to enrollment issues, technology concerns and quality and condition concerns. Lastly, 6.1 percent indicated that improvement and renovation decisions were a product of all of these categories, as were state and federal mandates. The two largest discrete response categories to this question indicated changes in enrollment (12.9%) or the quality and condition of existing facilities (30.1%) as the primary impetus for action. When asked to report how their school board had raised funds to improve and renovate school facilities over the years, 26.9 percent indicated that this was accomplished by proposing bond issues to the community. Fourteen percent reported that this was accomplished through additions to the baseline budget. A combination of bond issues and baseline budget increases was reported by 18.4 percent of the respondents. Almost twenty-three percent (22.8%) indicated that bonds, tax increases and baseline budget additions were utilized for this purpose. When asked to express an opinion regarding the proper role for federal funding of the improvement and renovation of existing school facilities, 41.5 percent reported that it should be provided in block grants without matching fund stipulations. Almost twenty-eight percent (27.6%) indicated that no federal funds should be provided, as this is not the business of the federal government.

Conclusions

The findings in this study indicate a positive perception by board members regarding the quality and condition, maintenance, and improvement and renovation of existing public school facilities. Board members, while acknowledging some unsatisfactory conditions, reported that their schools are either better than adequate or adequate and that the maintenance of school facilities is one of their top priorities. They indicated that their communities are proud of the overall quality and condition of their schools. They reported that the majority of these schools are safe and free from environmental hazards and that they are technologically adequate in meeting the needs of the educational program. Board members also see themselves as proactive in addressing maintenance issues and expressed the opinion that the amount of money spent on maintenance is adequate. They reported that they have enough information to make decisions regarding the improvement and renovation of school facilities and that they are acting on an approved plan to address facility needs in this area.

Discussion

These findings indicate that board member perceptions of the quality and condition, maintenance, and improvement and renovation of school facilities are quite different from findings reported in earlier studies. These studies indicated, not allowing for inflationary costs, that the projected deficits to address these issues had increased from \$25 billion in the AASA 1983 study to more than \$112 billion in the GAO 1995-96 study, a twelve-year period. The EWA 1989 study reported major repair needs in 61 percent of the schools. By 1992, the AASA study reported that this figure had increased to 74 percent. The GAO 1995-96 study reported that one-third of the schools needed extensive repairs.

There may be several reasons why the findings in this study contrast with findings in earlier studies. The respondents in this study are school board members who, for the first time, have been asked for their opinions in a national study on these issues. These

school board members subscribe to the American School Board Journal. Subscribers to the journal represent approximately one-third of more than 55,000 board members throughout the United States. Perhaps this professional affiliation with the National School Board Association may be described as complementary to demonstrating a proactive stance in understanding and addressing school system issues and needs.

The demographic profile of these board members could also explain a proactive attitude by the respondents. They are a highly educated group with nearly three-fourths (211) of the respondents (294) in this study reporting at least a college degree. More than half of these indicated a post college degree. Additionally, more than half of the responding board members reported income levels of greater than \$70,000 per year and more than half of these indicated incomes exceeding \$100,000 per year. Furthermore, more than sixty percent (179) reported themselves as conservative when asked about political classification. Nearly forty percent (114) of the respondents indicated that they were over fifty years of age. People with high incomes, advanced education, a conservative agenda and senior in their careers could be more inclined to be proactive in maintaining capital investments in the community.

More than forty percent of the returns in this study came from the East North Central (Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan and Wisconsin) and West North Central (Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska and Kansas) regions of the country. More than three-fourths of the board members in this study represented rural, small town or suburban school districts. Very few respondents (7.1%) reported an urban community profile as descriptive of their school district. Only 6.1 percent indicated their district size as serving more than 25,000 students while more than half the respondents reported a district size less than 5,000 students. Lastly, more than eighty percent reported their ethnicity as white. This data may be significant because it reflects sub-groupings different from those having serious facility issues identified in the earlier studies, most recently the GAO 1995-96 study. In the GAO study, the central cities, the western regions of the country with growing minority populations and large school districts reported the most serious facility issues. Smaller districts, further removed from large central cities, are less likely to be impacted by lower socio-economic groups with competing demands for limited resources. Property values are less likely to fluctuate and

local economic support for existing school facilities is likely to be more consistent. Additionally, issues of vandalism and property security are not as likely to demand attention in these districts when compared to larger urban school districts.

In summary, it is clear that board members in this study are not consistently in agreement with findings in earlier studies that address issues of maintenance and improvement and renovation needed to preserve the quality and condition of America's public schools. Instead, they report a high degree of satisfaction with these issues and see themselves as being proactive in maintaining school facilities. It could be significant that this is the first opportunity that selected board members have been given an opportunity to respond to facility maintenance, renovation and improvement issues. It could also be significant that the respondents in this study reflect a relatively small percentage of board members as a whole, and that the demographic profile of these respondents is likely quite different from large urban school districts. As a result, respondents in this study demonstrated a proactive understanding and concern for school facility issues.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study to examine the perceptions of selected school board members regarding the quality and condition, maintenance, and improvement and renovation of existing public school facilities, it is clear that practitioners and policy makers hold different perceptions regarding the overall quality and condition of their school facilities. In order to address these differences, it is recommended that school district superintendents and their staffs make consistent efforts to ensure that board members are kept informed about these issues. As indicated in the recommendations of the AASA 1992 study, educators, parents and the community at large must place a primary focus on school facilities and their importance in meeting the needs of the educational program (AASA, 1992). Awareness, understanding and concern for school facility issues can be enhanced by sharing the outcomes reported in each of the national studies with board members and the community at large. More importantly, school system staff, board members and the community need to conduct an on-going and careful review and analysis of facility conditions in relationship to educational program needs

and goals. Additional studies could address several issues that emerged in this study. Because the return from respondents in this study from urban districts was relatively small, a new study could focus specifically on urban school systems across the country. It would be important to determine whether board members in those settings share the same perceptions as reported by their colleagues in this study. Additionally, because the findings regarding funding sources for the improvement and renovation of school facilities did not focus clearly on any one resource, especially one that is aligned with perceptions of adequacy, it would be important to conduct a study that examines this issue in more detail. Are there successful practices that have creatively addressed this issue? Finally, it would be important to conduct a study that examines more closely whether or not a large percentage of board members across the country have similar or different perceptions from practitioners in the field regarding the quality and condition of their schools.