



Can School Boards Save DEI?



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At times marginalized, at times demonized, school board members in reality play a key and poorly understood role in governing our nation's uniquely decentralized and locally controlled public school system.

As the Trump administration sets in motion federal policies that prioritize privatization and deemphasize diversity, equity and inclusion, these bodies have the potential to create very different environments in the 13,373 districts they govern.

A [new book](#) by NEPC Fellow [Carrie Sampson](#) of Arizona State University presents research-based guidance to assist school boards in their work. Using over a decade's data collection, this research has included interviews with nearly 100 school board members, district leaders, and community members, reviews of hundreds of documents and videos, and an extensive exploration of other researchers' work.

Published by Harvard Education Press in November, [*Navigating School Board Politics: A Framework for Advancing Equity*](#) draws upon this research to present a four-step model of ways in which board members can use their influence in their districts, with their colleagues, in the community, and among other government entities to advance policies and practices that serve all their students:

- **Principles 1 and 2: Knowledge and Understanding:** To effectively advance an equity-based agenda, Sampson posits that board members need to first gather information (knowledge) in order to develop understanding (awareness of ideas, experi-

ences, and other abstractions). The first step of the process includes understanding their own identities, experiences, relationships to the community, and beliefs in order to “learn the questions to ask, the information to seek out, and the areas to reflect on.” Beyond that, board members need also to understand their school boards, districts, and communities.

- **Principles 3 and 4: Skills and Strategies:** Just as knowledge and understanding are interrelated, so too are skills and strategies. Sampson explains, “Skills are needed to accomplish a task or goal, whereas strategies map out how to accomplish a particular goal or task.” Specifically, board members hoping to further equity-based agendas need to build and navigate coalitions while leveraging state and federal policies and politics. To make a difference, board members also need to take a proactive role in responding to “complexities aligned with equity work” while also keeping an eye on the prize—which Sampson defines as “a future where equity is achieved for each and every child through strategic planning.”

Although Sampson’s framework is straightforward, she acknowledges the complexity of its execution in case studies set in three districts: Tucson, AZ, Las Vegas, NV, and Salt Lake City, UT.

“Deeply understanding your context, building strong coalitions, and mobilizing at all levels of government and law are critical to moving equity forward,” she writes. “And sometimes school boards must be courageous and willing to engage in civil disobedience and resist inequitable policies that harm vulnerable students. Taking action is part of being proactively responsive when—not if—the storm hits.”

NEPC Resources on Politics, Policy, and School Practices

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