

Center for Public Education



Three Pillars of Effective School Boards

AN **nsba** PUBLICATION

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Introduction

Whenever new results from the Nation's Report Card are released, public education leaders often face increased criticism and scrutiny. Recent headlines, such as “5 Big-City Public Schools Spend Billions More but Students Learning Less” ([Tapscott, 2026](#)) and “More Money, Same Results? Two Decades of Evidence on School Spending and Student Achievement” ([Jansen and Sinha, 2026](#)), reflect ongoing debates about school funding, student outcomes, and the effectiveness of public education systems. At the same time, school choice advocates continue to argue for expanded public funding for private school options with fewer regulatory requirements.

These discussions, however, can overlook the diversity of outcomes across public school systems. Many high-performing public schools and districts continue to serve students effectively, including students from low-income backgrounds. Across the country, public education leaders are working to improve student achievement, expand opportunities, and support long-term student success.

Highly effective school boards play a direct role in improving student achievement ([Dervarics and O'Brien, 2011](#)). According to Eight Characteristics of Effective School Boards, Dervarics and O'Brien's landmark study published more than a decade ago by the Center for Public Education (CPE) of the National School Boards Association (NSBA), school boards in high-achieving districts share eight common characteristics: clear vision, knowledge, accountability, strong relationships, data savvy, resource alignment, united leadership, and a commitment to continuous learning and professional development. Together, these characteristics provide a governance framework for advancing student success.

Eight Characteristics of an Effective School Board

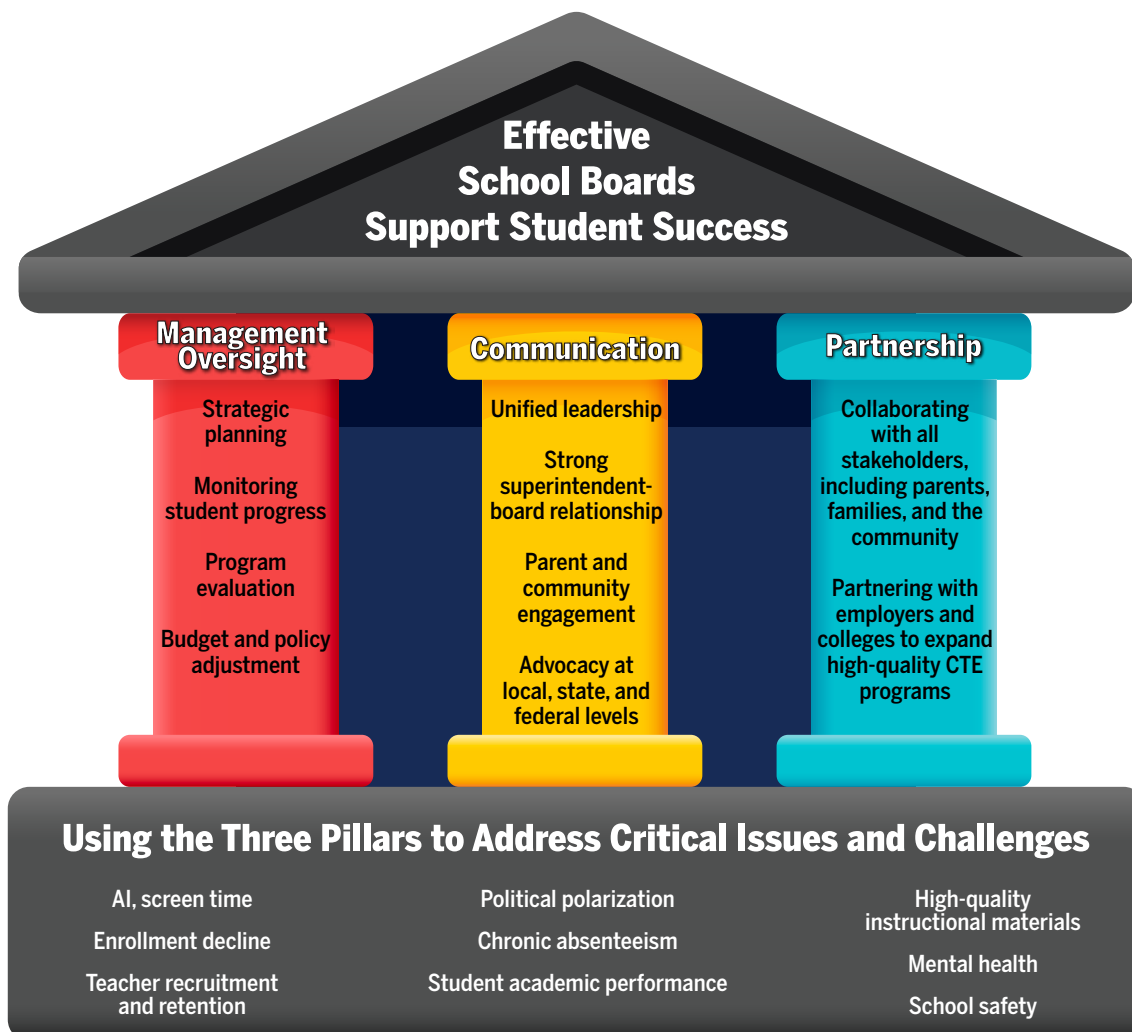
1. Effective school boards commit to a vision of high expectations for student achievement and quality instruction and define clear goals toward that vision.
2. Effective school boards have strong shared beliefs and values about what is possible for students and their ability to learn, and of the system and its ability to teach all children at high levels.
3. Effective school boards are accountability-driven, spending less time on operational issues and more time focused on policies to improve student achievement.
4. Effective school boards have a collaborative relationship with staff and the community and establish a strong communications structure to inform and engage both internal and external stakeholders in setting and achieving district goals.
5. Effective boards are data savvy; they embrace and monitor data, even when the information is negative, and use it to drive continuous improvement.
6. Effective school boards align and sustain resources, such as professional development, to meet district goals.
7. Effective school boards lead as a united team with the superintendent, each from their respective roles, with strong collaboration and mutual trust.
8. Effective school boards take part in team development and training, sometimes with their superintendents, to build shared knowledge, values, and commitments for their improvement efforts.

Why This Report

While these principles remain relevant, today’s educational landscape presents school boards with new and increasingly complex challenges. In the years following the pandemic, school districts have faced rapid change, political tension, and increasing public scrutiny ([Association of Educational Service Agencies, 2023](#)). According to [Education Week](#), school boards “have become the focal point of many heated, high-profile debates on everything, from pandemic-era mask policies to debates about LGBTQ+ students’ rights.” In many communities, board meetings that were once routine have become sources of conflict, disrupting governance and reshaping how boards engage with the public ([Stephens, 2025](#)).

Given these changes, it is important to revisit effective school board governance and examine how the principles identified in Eight Characteristics of Effective School Boards apply in today’s educational environment. This report builds on the existing framework by adding practical strategies to help school board members navigate current challenges while keeping student success at the center of their work (see Chart 1).

Chart 1. Three Pillars of Effective School Boards



Three Pillars of Effective School Boards

The goal of effective school board governance is to ensure that every student becomes a productive citizen in a democratic society, equipped with strong literacy, numeracy, and civic knowledge, as well as the skills needed for college, careers, and life. Drawing on the Eight Characteristics of Effective School Boards, current research, and exemplary district practices, we identified three pillars of effective school board governance.

- **Management Oversight.** Effective school boards provide strategic oversight of district management while respecting the superintendent's responsibility for day-to-day operations. In their oversight role, boards must manage their own time, relationships, and resources strategically and responsibly. Their role is not to micromanage daily operations or assume the responsibilities of the superintendent. Rather, effective board governance focuses on strategic planning, monitoring student progress, evaluating programs, and overseeing district performance. Effective boards set clear goals, use data to guide decision-making, and align financial and human resources with district priorities. To strengthen their governance capacity, school board members should engage in ongoing professional development to broaden their knowledge and strengthen their leadership skills.
- **Communication.** Effective school boards rely on frequent, transparent, and collaborative communication. Open dialogue and shared understanding are essential to building unified leadership and strong superintendent-board relationships. Effective boards communicate clearly with staff, families, and the broader community, while establishing structures that keep both internal and external stakeholders informed and engaged in advancing district goals.
- **Partnerships.** Effective school boards build strong partnerships grounded in shared beliefs about student potential and schools' ability to help all students succeed at high levels. Boards should actively engage parents and families as essential partners in student success. They should also collaborate with industry, higher education, and community leaders to expand opportunities for students and strengthen career and college pathways.

Management Oversight, Communication, and Partnerships are the three pillars that support the framework of effective school board governance. Each pillar plays an essential role, and effective governance requires strength in all three areas. Together, these pillars help school boards address current issues facing public education and navigate the challenges that can hinder effective governance.

Using the Three Pillars to Address Critical Issues and Challenges.

This report focuses on three major issues currently facing school boards, namely, political polarization, technology use, and enrollment changes. Additional issues and challenges identified in the chart above are discussed in another report published by NSBA's Center for Public Education in 2026: [Drivers of Student Success](#).



1. Political Polarization

Political polarization is making effective school board governance increasingly challenging. According to a recent study by Ballotpedia (2025), 41% of surveyed school board members reported that their boards operated in coalitions aligned along political party lines. Many boards were described as divided along ideological lines, particularly in swing or urban communities. One board member explained, “We definitely have a progressive block and a conservative block. It’s subtle, but it shapes everything from how we vote to how we talk.”

To navigate these challenges and remain focused on student success, school boards must strengthen three core practices: managing relationships and disagreements constructively, communicating clearly and respectfully, and building strong partnerships with parents, families, and the broader community.

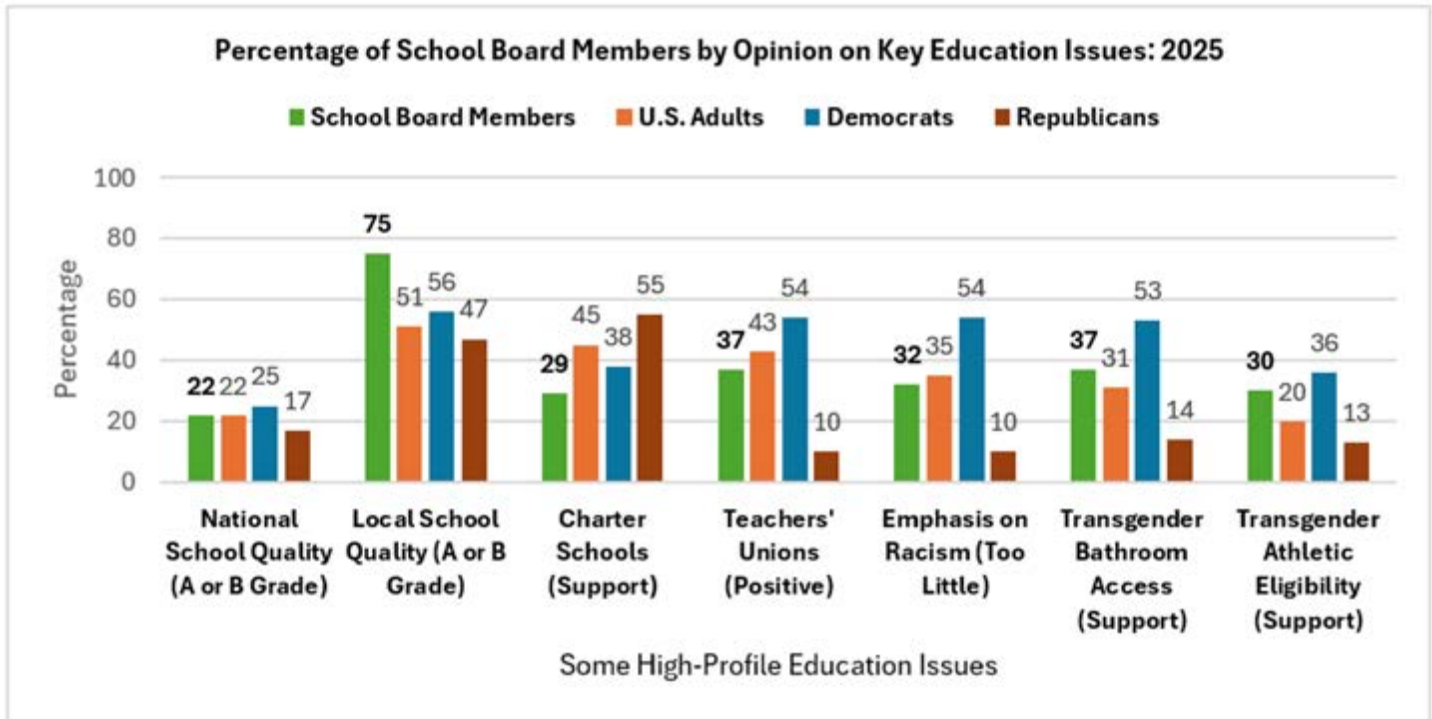
Managing Relationships and Conflict Constructively

Political polarization and media attention can create the impression that school board meetings are routinely contentious. The Ballotpedia (2025) study found that many school board members feel discouraged by negative media coverage and frustrated by misinformation on social media and in public discourse. While respondents believed their boards were doing meaningful work to improve student outcomes, they noted that public attention often focuses on controversy rather than results. Some also reported that cultural debates and political polarization can divert attention from substantive discussions about student achievement.

Research suggests that public perceptions do not always reflect the reality of local governance. Two recent studies support these observations. A study by the [Fordham Institute](#) (2025) found that most school board meetings are calm, cooperative, and largely nonpartisan. Although board members’ views often reflect those of their communities on high-profile cultural issues, they may differ from the general public on topics such as school quality, school choice, and teachers’ unions (see Chart 2).



Chart 2. School Board Members' Opinions on Some High-Profile Education Issues Differ From Those of the U.S. Public



Source: David M. Houston and Michael T. Hartney. [Who's on Board? School Boards and Political Representation in an Age of Conflict](#). Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Institute (October 2025).

Similarly, [Holman, Johnson, and Simko \(2024\)](#) found that while most school boards experience conflict at some point, the most intense disputes are concentrated in a relatively small number of districts. These conflicts often involve cultural issues, such as racial diversity and gender identity, and are more common in larger urban and suburban districts and in politically competitive communities. The researchers concluded that many highly publicized conflicts are driven by broader state and national political debates rather than routine local governance issues.

As elected governing bodies, school boards must represent diverse community interests while maintaining a focus on student success ([Kogan et al., 2021](#)). This responsibility becomes more challenging when disagreements escalate into division or when public controversies overshadow the board's governance responsibilities. Research suggests that persistent conflict can undermine effectiveness. For example, districts where board members report higher levels of conflict tend to experience lower academic performance and more student-related challenges than districts with lower levels of conflict ([Ford and Ihrke, 2017](#)).

Effective school boards recognize that disagreement is inevitable, but division is not. By managing relationships constructively, maintaining a clear focus on student outcomes, and addressing differences through respectful dialogue, boards can navigate political polarization while continuing to advance student success.

Communicating Clearly to Build Public Trust and Unified Leadership

While political polarization can create challenges, research suggests that conflict itself is not necessarily harmful. The Ballotpedia (2025) study found that 46% of surveyed school board members rated the level of internal conflict on their boards as high, with many citing local political polarization as a contributing factor. About 30% reported that disagreements sometimes became personal, particularly when discussions involved personal agendas or played out publicly, including on social media.

At the same time, the findings revealed important signs of resilience and effective governance. More than half of respondents (52%) said disagreements rarely or never became personal, and nearly two-thirds (62%) believed that conflict often led to productive outcomes. Board members identified several factors that helped them navigate disagreements effectively, including strong leadership from superintendents and board chairs, clearly defined board norms and bylaws, and a shared commitment to student success rather than political ideology.

As one board member observed, “We fight hard in the meetings, but it’s never personal. We’ll go have coffee after.” Another noted, “It used to be very personal. Now we’ve done trainings, and it’s much more professionalized.”

These findings highlight the importance of clear communication and unified leadership. Effective school boards create an environment where members can express different viewpoints respectfully, engage in candid discussions, and work through disagreements without damaging relationships. By following established governance norms, participating in ongoing professional development, and keeping student achievement at the center of decision-making, boards can turn conflict into constructive dialogue and build the trust necessary for effective governance.



Governance Structure and Training Strengthens Board-Superintendent Partnerships

The board-superintendent relationship is widely viewed as one of the most important factors in effective school board governance. Findings from the Ballotpedia survey show a near-even split between collaborative relationships (41%) and conflicting relationships (43%), suggesting that these dynamics vary considerably across districts and are often shaped by local conditions.

The survey identified several factors that influence these relationships. Politics can sometimes create additional challenges. In some urban or mayor-controlled districts, superintendents may be perceived as more accountable to political leaders than to the school board. At the same time, unclear distinctions between governance and day-to-day management can create tension, contributing to mistrust or micromanagement.

The findings also suggest that governance structures and professional training can improve and strengthen board-superintendent relationships. Respondents frequently cited practices such as structured onboarding, governance workshops, and regular superintendent evaluations as helpful in building collaboration and trust.

Practice Box 1 highlights how school districts use management oversight, communication, and partnership strategies to strengthen board-superintendent relationships. The three district examples illustrate practical approaches to building trust, improving collaboration, and aligning leadership efforts. District leadership teams shared these practices at the 2026 NSBA Annual Conference in San Antonio.



Practice Box 1 — How Three Districts Build Strong Superintendent-Board Relationships

Seaford School District (DE): Trust-Focused Governance

The [Seaford School District](#) serves a diverse, multilingual student population of approximately 3,500 students in a region that reflects many of the challenges facing both urban and rural communities. The board has clearly articulated its [educational philosophy](#) and made it publicly available on the district website.

Through intentional collaboration with the superintendent, the board works to build mutual trust by emphasizing:

- Clear and consistent communication.
- Role clarity and shared values.
- Communication practices that promote transparency, respect, and collective responsibility for student outcomes.
- Early identification of signs of strained governance relationships and proactive efforts to rebuild trust.
- Clear definitions of board and superintendent responsibilities to avoid micromanagement and misalignment.

When hiring the current superintendent, the board emphasized leadership qualities aligned with these priorities. In announcing the appointment, the board stated:

“The Board of Education is confident that her visionary leadership, collaborative approaches to problem solving, and strong communication skills make her an ideal candidate to lead Seaford’s educational community into a bright and promising future. Dr. DiGirolamo leads with innovative strategies, integrity, and community engagement in mind. She has strengths in a wide range of topics, from curriculum to school finance, that will benefit the district in many ways.”

Del Valle ISD (TX): Streamlining Communication Through a Board Resource Hub

The [Del Valle Independent School District](#) in Texas is a fast-growing district east of Austin serving nearly 12,000 students. The board has implemented intentional systems to build trust, streamline communication, and strengthen governance. To support the work of the superintendent and improve coordination, the district developed a board resource hub designed to increase transparency, responsiveness, and operational efficiency.

The district also provides clear communication protocols for staff, parents, and community members. On the school board [webpage](#), the district outlines a communication process stating that “Citizens and staff wishing to contact the Superintendent regarding a specific school, teacher or child, should begin at the level closest to the concern.” In addition, district leaders provide a [Parent Concern Flowchart](#) that explains how families and community members can address concerns and resolve disagreements with schools.

A key practice in strengthening superintendent-board relationships in Del Valle ISD is the use of practical communication tools and clearly defined protocols that improve board engagement and align leadership efforts across a rapidly growing district. Supported by a strong relationship with the board, the [superintendent](#) is leading the district through an ambitious continuous improvement effort grounded in community engagement, transparent communication, and a sustained focus on meeting the needs of nearly 12,000 students.

Charles County Public Schools (MD): A Governance Handbook and Accountability Metrics

[Charles County Public Schools](#) in Maryland serves approximately 27,765 students across 40 schools and centers in both urban and rural communities. The district’s student population is predominantly Black (58%) and Hispanic (15%). Over the past two years, the board has undertaken a comprehensive effort to strengthen alignment, clarity, and coherence across its governance work, the district’s strategic plan, and the superintendent’s performance indicators to improve student outcomes and support continuous district improvement.

The board developed a [governance handbook](#) to define roles, expectations, and shared commitments more clearly. Through this codification process, the board strengthened its effectiveness and functionality, built trust among board members, and clarified how members support one another in carrying out their responsibilities. Most importantly, the board adopted practical approaches to remain focused on student outcomes while navigating a complex and rapidly changing educational environment.

The governance handbook also establishes a clear process for evaluating the superintendent’s performance. Specifically, the board conducts formal evaluations twice each year, including a mid-year review in December and a year-end review in June, as outlined in the superintendent’s contract. In addition, the board developed and refined goals and performance metrics that are directly aligned with the district’s strategic priorities and continuous improvement efforts.

2. Technology Use: AI and Screen Time

Technology is transforming nearly every aspect of education, creating both new opportunities and new challenges for school boards. Artificial intelligence (AI) has the potential to improve teaching, learning, and district operations. At the same time, growing concerns about excessive screen time have raised questions about student well-being, engagement, and healthy development. As governing bodies, school boards must make informed decisions in a rapidly changing environment where innovation often outpaces research and policy.

To ensure technology serves students rather than distracts from learning, effective school boards rely on three core practices: managing time and resources to build knowledge and capacity, communicating with stakeholders to develop shared understanding, and partnering with educators, families, and technology experts to guide responsible implementation. Together, these strategies help boards maximize the benefits of technology while minimizing potential risks to student success.

The rapid growth of AI spotlights the importance of this governance role. In 2025, 54% of students and 53% of English language arts, mathematics, and science teachers reported using AI for school-related purposes ([RAND, 2025](#)). Districts are also moving quickly to establish guardrails for AI use. More than three-quarters of districts (79%) reported having AI guidelines in place in 2026, up from 57% in 2025 ([CoSN, 2026](#)).

Despite this rapid adoption, many school boards have not yet developed comprehensive policies or governance frameworks to rethink and model learning in the age of AI. As AI adoption increasingly outpaces district controls, boards face important questions about what knowledge and skills students need, what districts should build to support future learning, and what safeguards should be in place before expanding AI use. Like other governing bodies, school boards must make decisions in an environment characterized by rapid innovation, competing viewpoints, and limited evidence about which AI applications are most effective, safe, and educationally beneficial.

By investing time to understand emerging technologies, engaging parents, students, and community members in meaningful discussions, and partnering with educators and technology experts, school boards can help ensure that AI enhances learning, supports student success, and turns screen time into learning time.



Practice Box 2 — How One School Board Used AI and Another Reduced Screen Time

The following examples are drawn from presentations by two urban school district leaders at the 2026 NSBA Annual Conference in San Antonio.

Perry Township Schools (IN): Using AI to Strengthen Leadership Hiring

[Perry Township Schools](#) serves nearly 16,000 students across 24 schools and programs. To improve leadership recruitment, the district redesigned its administrative hiring process using AI-assisted leadership profiling, candidate screening, performance assessments, and interview support. District leaders report that the approach improved efficiency, strengthened candidate selection, and helped identify high-quality leaders to support student success.

Spokane Public Schools (WA): Reducing Screen Time Through Real-Life Engagement

[Spokane Public Schools](#) serves nearly 30,000 students. To reduce screen time and strengthen student engagement, the district launched the Engage IRL ([Engage in Real Life](#)) initiative. With strong board support, the district expanded access to in-person activities, strengthened school culture, and increased student connectedness. Through collaboration with families, staff, and community partners, the initiative promoted healthier technology use and greater real-world engagement.

Managing Time and Resources to Build AI Knowledge and Capacity

AI is evolving rapidly in education. According to a recent [RAND Corporation study](#) (2026), the percentage of middle and high school students who reported using AI to help with homework increased from 48% in May 2025 to 62% in December 2025. At the same time, concerns about AI's impact on learning are growing. The study found that 67% of students agreed that “the more students use AI for their schoolwork, the more it will harm their critical thinking skills.”

Despite the rapid growth of AI research in education — from just 28 studies in 2023 to more than 800 studies in 2025 — evidence on its effectiveness remains limited. According to researchers at [Stanford University](#) (2026), none of the student-facing causal studies identified were conducted in U.S. K–12 school settings. Understanding how AI affects student learning across different subjects, grade levels, student populations, and instructional contexts will require substantially more research. The Stanford [study](#) concludes that existing studies provide useful early insights, but rigorous, context-specific evidence from U.S. schools is still lacking.

This limited evidence base places additional pressure on district leaders and school boards as they consider AI-related policies and investments. At the same time, many board members have limited experience with AI. In an NSBA survey conducted in April and May 2026, 46% of school board members — including board presidents, vice presidents, secretaries, and treasurers — reported that they had never used an AI tool. In addition, 69% said they had not received any formal AI training. These findings raise important questions about how school boards can effectively evaluate AI tools, oversee AI implementation, and make informed decisions about professional development and policy.

As AI continues to evolve, school boards may need to dedicate time and resources to building their own knowledge and capacity so they can provide informed governance and oversight of AI use in schools.



NSBA's AI Smart Certification

Artificial intelligence is reshaping classrooms, operations, and the broader public education landscape. NSBA, in partnership with the National AI Academy (NAIA), has launched the AI Smart Certification for K-12 education leaders. The NSBA AI Smart Certification provides foundational and practical insights into how AI is shaping public education, helping school leaders make informed, strategic decisions about technology integration, policy, and governance.

Through this certification, participants will:

- Gain a clear understanding of AI's impact on teaching, learning, and operations.
- Explore best practices for ethical and effective AI implementation in schools.
- Build confidence in leading AI-driven transformation across their districts.

The AI Smart Certification prepares board members to ask the right questions, set informed priorities, and lead confidently as AI becomes integral to district operations.

(Source: [NSBA AI Smart Certification - National School Boards Association](#))



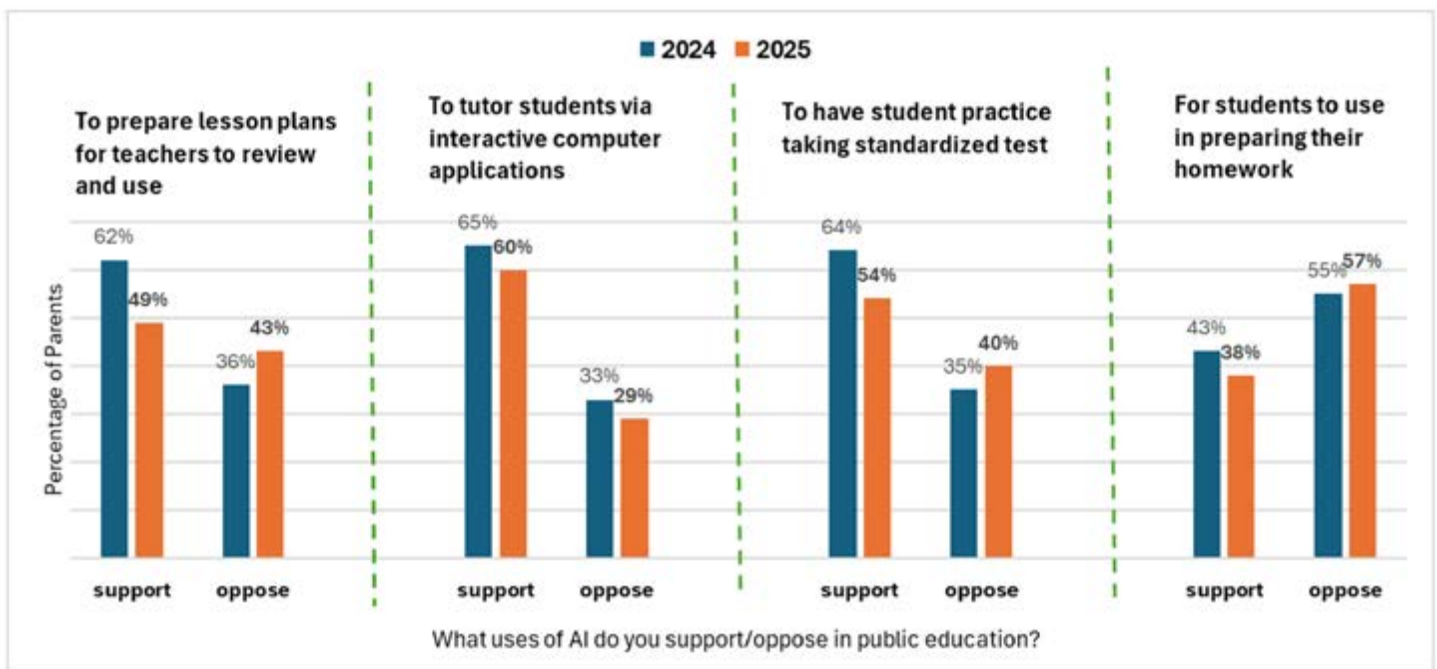
Building Shared Understanding of Responsible AI Use Through Communication and Engagement

As discussed above, school districts are making important decisions about AI largely on their own, often without clear federal guidance or a widely accepted roadmap. District leaders are selecting AI tools, training teachers, developing policies for student use, and determining what responsible and effective implementation should look like in their local contexts.

A recent study by the Center on Reinventing Public Education ([CRPE, 2026](#)) found that most early AI adopters (58%) are using AI primarily to strengthen existing instructional models and support traditional measures of student success. Another 16% of districts are using AI to advance broader reforms, such as mastery-based or competency-based learning. Only 7% reported exploring fundamentally new approaches to teaching, learning, and system design.

At the same time, parents have expressed concerns about the growing use of AI in schools. These concerns include teachers using AI to develop lesson plans, students using AI to complete assignments, and the sharing of student information with AI platforms. According to the [57th Annual PDK Poll](#), parent support for AI declined across several applications, with the sharpest declines related to AI-assisted lesson planning (see Chart 3). In addition, 68% of parents opposed providing AI software with access to student grades, assessment results, or other personal information.

Chart 3. Parent Support for AI Declined Across Several Applications



Source: [The 2025 Annual PDK Poll](#)

Given the rapidly evolving nature of AI and the diverse perspectives surrounding its use, school boards can play an important role in fostering open communication among educators, parents, students, and community members. Through ongoing engagement, boards can build shared understanding, address concerns, and help ensure that AI policies reflect both educational goals and community values.

Partnering With Educators and Technology Experts to Develop an AI Adoption Roadmap

A paradox has emerged in AI-driven education technology. According to the [2026 report](#) by the Consortium for School Networking (CoSN), education technology leaders have become significantly more optimistic about AI's potential in just one year. Confidence in AI's ability to improve productivity and personalized learning nearly doubled, while expectations for its role in student tutoring and workforce readiness increased even more sharply.

At the same time, concerns about technology's impact on students continue to grow ([Kingkade, 2025](#); [New America, 2026](#)). Parents, researchers, and education leaders have raised concerns about access to inappropriate content, increased screen time, academic integrity, data privacy, and classroom distractions. In response, some are advocating for broad restrictions or limits on the use of educational technology in schools.

As a result, school leaders face a difficult challenge: balancing the potential benefits of AI with legitimate concerns about its risks and unintended consequences. One way to address this challenge is to partner with both education technology experts and educators to ensure that AI investments focus on improving teaching and learning. Such partnerships can help districts maximize the value of educational technology while building trust among educators, parents, and the broader community.

The CoSN survey highlights several important trends. Many districts are making substantial investments in the technical and operational aspects of AI:

- More than half of districts have AI initiatives focused on productivity, including AI-powered tools and training for administrators and teachers.
- Nearly two-thirds of districts (64%) are using AI for operational functions, a substantial increase from 37% the previous year.
- As access to digital learning expands and one-to-one device programs reach record levels, most districts (66%) report having adequate staff to support core technical functions such as network administration, software installation, and system maintenance.

However, fewer districts are focusing on the instructional side of AI implementation:

- Only 41% of districts have implemented AI initiatives specifically designed to support classroom instruction and student learning.
- A majority of districts (58%) report being understaffed when it comes to helping educators effectively integrate technology into teaching and learning.

Together, these findings suggest that districts have made significant progress in building the infrastructure and operational capacity needed to support AI. The next challenge is ensuring that AI investments are matched with strong instructional support, professional development, and evidence-based implementation strategies that improve student learning outcomes.

To realize the instructional potential of AI, district leaders, including school boards and administrators, should engage teachers and school staff in ongoing communication and collaboration. Teachers are often the first to experience both the opportunities and challenges of AI in the classroom, making their perspectives essential to effective implementation.

Recent surveys suggest that teacher use of AI is growing rapidly. A [2025 Gallup survey](#) found that nearly 3 in 10 teachers use AI tools weekly, saving an estimated six weeks of work time per year. Most teachers who use AI also report that the tools improve the quality of their work. Similarly, a [RAND survey](#) (2025) found that teacher use of AI increased by more than 25 percentage points in one year. In spring 2025, more than half of English language arts, mathematics, and science teachers reported using AI for instructional planning or teaching, compared with only 25% the previous year.

At the same time, teachers continue to raise concerns about the lack of clear guidance on student use of AI. In particular, many report uncertainty about when AI-assisted work should be considered appropriate support and when it should be viewed as academic dishonesty. These findings highlight the importance of establishing clear expectations, providing professional development, and creating opportunities for educators to help shape AI policies and practices.

Encouragingly, several national organizations — including the International Society for Technology in Education ([ISTE](#)), the Consortium for School Networking ([CoSN](#)), and [InnovateEDU](#) — are conducting research and developing practical guidance to help school leaders use AI thoughtfully. Their work can help districts move beyond operational efficiency and explore how AI can support student learning, educator effectiveness, and broader educational goals.



Practice Box 3 — Tools and Resources for School Boards to Evaluate AI Technology in Education

Asking Teachers Better Questions

[Rae Fearing](#), director of programs at the California Association for Leading Innovation in Education, recommends that districts discuss technology use with teachers during the hiring process. Asking the right questions can help leaders identify strengths, understand support needs, and tailor professional learning.

Consider asking:

1. How do you determine whether a digital tool improves student learning?
2. How do you support students who face challenges accessing or using technology?
3. What role should artificial intelligence play in teaching and learning?
4. What support would help you integrate technology effectively into your classroom?

These conversations provide valuable insights into teachers' experiences and needs while signaling that technology and AI are integral parts of effective instruction, not optional add-ons.

The Responsible K-5 EdTech Use Pillars

[InnovateEDU](#) emphasizes that K–5 students require a different approach to educational technology than older learners. Effective K–5 technology policies should prioritize child development, student well-being, and human relationships. Its framework is built on five key principles:

1. **Active Learning Over Passive Consumption:** Prioritize technology that promotes creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking rather than passive scrolling or entertainment.
2. **Equitable Access:** Ensure students with disabilities and multilingual learners have access to the tools and support needed for a free appropriate public education (FAPE).
3. **Science of Learning and Development:** Align technology use with research on child development, emphasizing play, engagement, and social interaction.
4. **Tactile-to-Digital Progression:** Protect hands-on learning in the early grades and introduce technology in developmentally appropriate ways.
5. **Cognitive Load Management:** Limit overstimulation and discourage software designs that distract or manipulate young learners.

A Framework for Evaluating Classroom Technology

Schools use a wide range of digital tools, but not all technologies are designed for the same purpose. In the [2026 EdTech Evidence Report](#), researchers categorized 150 classroom technologies into two broad groups:

1. **Purpose-Built Educational Technology:** Tools specifically designed for K–12 education and typically aligned with district implementation, student privacy protections, and education interoperability standards. Examples: Kahoot!, i-Ready, Panorama Education, and Sora by OverDrive.
2. **Consumer Technology:** General-purpose tools developed for broad audiences rather than educational settings. While commonly used in classrooms, they were not originally designed for teaching and learning. Examples: YouTube, Canva, Reddit, and ChatGPT.

This distinction can help school leaders evaluate technology based on its intended purpose, evidence of effectiveness, privacy protections, and alignment with instructional goals.

Eight Questions School Boards Can Ask About Classroom Technology

Technology vendors often make compelling claims about their products. To make informed purchasing decisions and ensure technology serves the interests of students, educators, families, and communities, school boards can ask the following questions:

1. What student outcomes is this technology designed to improve?
2. What evidence supports its effectiveness?
3. How much instructional time and student attention does it require, and is the investment worthwhile?
4. What student data are collected, and how are privacy and security protected?
5. How will this technology integrate with existing systems and instructional practices?
6. Does the product have a documented Voluntary Product Accessibility Template (VPAT)?
7. Do teachers and students find the technology accessible, useful, and easy to use?
8. What data and reports will the product provide, and how will they inform decision-making?

(Source: [202602-instructure-evidencereport-booklet - Google Drive](#))

3. Challenges Arising From Enrollment Shifts

Enrollment shifts are reshaping public education across the country and forcing many school boards to make difficult decisions about staffing, facilities, budgets, and educational programs. To navigate these challenges successfully, effective school boards rely on three core practices: managing resources strategically, communicating openly with stakeholders, and partnering with families and communities to build support for change.

A variety of factors can influence public school enrollment, including birth rates, school choice options, migration patterns, and immigration trends ([ECS, 2026](#)). As a result, some districts experience enrollment growth while others face enrollment declines. According to the federal [Condition of Education 2026](#) report, total public elementary and secondary school enrollment decreased by 2%, from 50.3 million students in fall 2014 to 49.4 million in fall 2024. Enrollment declines have been particularly noticeable in several large [urban districts](#), including Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York ([ProPublica, 2025](#)).

Between January 2025 and May 2026, 13 large urban and suburban school districts across eight states announced plans to close, consolidate, or repurpose schools. In total, 138 schools were affected. The largest plan was approved by the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, which closed 29 schools (see Table 1).



Table 1. Recent Public School Closures and Consolidations in U.S. School Districts (2025–2026)

District	State	Date Approved	Schools Closed/ Consolidated	Effective Date	Expected Savings	Enrollment Context
Pittsburgh Public Schools	Pennsylvania	May 27, 2026	12	2027–28	\$4M (2027); \$8M (2028)	Lost about 25% of students between 2013–14 and 2023–24.
School District of Philadelphia	Pennsylvania	Apr. 30, 2026	17	2026–27	N/A	Enrollment declined 12% between 2014–15 and 2024–25.
Cedar Rapids Community School District	Iowa	Apr. 27, 2026	7	2027–28	\$1–1.5M per closed school annually	Enrollment fell 4.3% from 2024–25 to 2025–26.
San Jose Unified School District	California	Mar. 26, 2026	5	End of 2025–26	\$1.475M annually	Enrollment declined 20% since 2017–18.
Fort Bend Independent School District	Texas	Mar. 9, 2026	7	2026–27	\$5–7M annually	Lost 1,801 students and \$18M in revenue in 2025–26.
Houston Independent School District	Texas	Feb. 26, 2026	12	2026–27	\$14.6–20M	Declining enrollment is attributed to birth rates, housing, and charter competition.
Judson Independent School District	Texas	Feb. 9, 2026	4	2026–27	\$7M	Enrollment projected to fall from 22,500 to 21,100 within five years.

Source: [As student enrollment declines, a look at public school closures | K-12 Dive](#)

Table 1. Recent Public School Closures and Consolidations in U.S. School Districts (2025–2026)

District	State	Date Approved	Schools Closed/ Consolidated	Effective Date	Expected Savings	Enrollment Context
Broward County Public Schools	Florida	Jan. 21, 2026	6 (consolidated)	2026–27	\$8.95M annually	Enrollment declined nearly 17% over ten years.
Corpus Christi Independent School District	Texas	Jan. 12, 2026	7	Aug. 2026	\$11M	Enrollment declined from 36,342 to 32,073 since 2019–20.
Kyrene School District	Arizona	Dec. 16, 2025	6	2026–27 & 2027–28	\$5.8M annually	Enrollment dropped to 12,000 students; capacity is 20,000.
Cleveland Metropolitan School District	Ohio	Dec. 9, 2025	29	Aug. 2026	\$30M annually	Enrollment fell from 70,000 to 34,000 over two decades.
Atlanta Public Schools	Georgia	Dec. 3, 2025	16 (closed or repurposed)	Aug. 2027	\$300–350M by 2040	50,000 students enrolled versus 70,000-seat capacity.
Austin Independent School District	Texas	Nov. 20, 2025	10	Aug. 2026	\$21.5M	Enrollment declined by 10,000 students over the past decade.

Source: [As student enrollment declines, a look at public school closures | K-12 Dive](#)

Several factors are driving these decisions. Declining birth rates have reduced the number of school-age children in many communities. At the same time, the expansion of school choice options, including charter schools and voucher programs, has increased competition for student enrollment. Because school funding is often tied to enrollment, declining student populations can create budget deficits. In addition, many districts face excess building capacity and aging facilities, making consolidation a financially attractive strategy.

Significant enrollment shifts often require district leaders to make difficult financial and operational decisions. Common responses include school closures, school consolidations, redistricting, and efforts to secure additional funding through levies or bond measures. While these decisions can be challenging, they are often necessary to align district resources and facilities with changing enrollment patterns.

As districts navigate enrollment declines and the difficult decisions that often follow, effective governance becomes essential. School boards and district leaders can respond by strengthening three core practices: management oversight, communication, and partnership. Through sound financial planning, data-informed decision-making, and long-term facility management, districts can better align resources with enrollment realities. Clear and transparent communication with families, staff, and community members can build trust and reduce uncertainty during periods of change. Strong partnerships with parents, community organizations, employers, and local policymakers can help districts identify creative solutions, maintain public support, and ensure that decisions remain focused on student success. By integrating these practices, districts can manage enrollment challenges more effectively while preserving educational opportunities for students.



Practice Box 4 — How Three School Boards Turned Challenges Into Opportunities

Littleton Public Schools (CO): Transforming School Closure Into Community Connection

[Littleton Public Schools](#) (LPS) in Colorado is a large suburban district serving more than 13,000 students. In 2021, the district made the difficult decision to close a long-standing neighborhood elementary school due to declining enrollment. As part of the process, the school board committed to engaging the community in identifying local needs and assets and exploring how the facility could continue to serve residents. That effort ultimately transformed the closed school into a community center and strengthened partnerships between LPS and local organizations. Today, the district continues to leverage those partnerships and the community center to support students and families.

LPS is now facing another financial challenge. During the 2026 Colorado legislative session, state leaders continued to address a significant structural budget deficit while implementing a new school funding model. As a result, LPS projects a \$10.6 million budget shortfall for the coming year. Recognizing the impact such reductions could have on students and staff, the superintendent and school board have emphasized clear, transparent communication with the community. The district publicly shared information about the budget challenges and potential impacts, including a letter from the superintendent posted on the LPS website, helping stakeholders understand the financial realities facing the district and the decisions ahead. ([State budget deficit leaves LPS with \\$10.6 million in cuts for next year | A Destination District](#))

Anne Arundel County Public Schools (MD): Redistricting With Technology, Transparency, and Trust

Redistricting is often one of the most contentious processes a school district can undertake. Maryland's [Anne Arundel County Public Schools](#) (AACPS) turned this challenge into an opportunity to build trust and improve community engagement by developing a custom [web-based tool](#) featuring interactive maps, enrollment projections, facility utilization data, and layered community feedback. The district shared five key lessons from its redistricting efforts:

1. Use enrollment data and projections to guide boundary decisions and align resources with student needs.
2. Leverage technology and transparency to help stakeholders understand complex redistricting proposals and decision-making processes.
3. Promote cross-departmental collaboration among planning, communications, district leadership, and the school board to manage enrollment changes, engage stakeholders, and support equitable outcomes.
4. Deploy interactive geo-mapping tools to improve public understanding of boundary options and their potential impacts.
5. Engage the community through ongoing communication and meaningful dialogue throughout the redistricting process.

By combining data-driven planning, transparent communication, and cross-functional partnerships, AACPS demonstrated how districts can navigate difficult enrollment-related decisions while maintaining public trust and support.

Colchester School District (VT): A Journey to Pass a Facilities Bond Vote

[Colchester School District](#) is a suburban district in Vermont serving approximately 2,200 students across five schools. To engage its diverse community, the district provides communications in more than 20 languages. Most of its school buildings are nearly 60 years old and have received few major upgrades, while the state provides no school construction aid.

To address these facility needs, the school board took a strategic approach to educating the community about the district's capital improvement needs and the proposed bond measure. The district implemented a comprehensive outreach campaign using multiple communication channels and formats, with a strong emphasis on personal stories and emotional connections to demonstrate the impact of aging facilities on students and staff.

District leaders emphasized that successful bond initiatives require more than sound financial planning. They depend on effective communication and [meaningful community engagement](#) that build public understanding and voter support. Their experience also highlights the important leadership role [school boards](#) play in advancing major capital projects by communicating a clear vision, engaging stakeholders, and fostering trust throughout the process.

Conclusion

School boards are a cornerstone of American democracy. Elected by their communities, school board members represent local voices and provide governance for public schools. Although their responsibilities vary across states and districts, effective school boards are ultimately judged by their leadership practices, the decisions they make, and the outcomes they achieve for students.

This report suggests that effective school boards consistently demonstrate strength in three interconnected pillars: management oversight, communication, and partnership. Through effective management of board time, relationships, and resources, boards align priorities with district goals and monitor progress toward student success. Through clear and consistent communication, boards build trust, promote transparency, and provide unified leadership. Through strong partnerships, boards engage families, community organizations, employers, and policymakers in supporting student achievement and preparing students for success in school, work, and life.

No school board is perfect, and no board excels in every area. Some boards demonstrate strengths in strategic management oversight, while others stand out in communication or community partnerships. Effective governance is not a destination but an ongoing process of learning, adaptation, and continuous improvement. By strengthening their capacity in management oversight, communication, and partnership, school boards can better address emerging challenges, make informed decisions, and create the conditions that support success for all students in school, work, and life.



Note

The examples highlighted in this report are drawn from sessions presented at the National School Boards Association's Annual Conference. In addition to programming led by national experts and district leaders, NSBA's **Ready, Set, Govern** track is specifically designed to support school board members in strengthening their practices in the key areas explored in this report: management oversight, communication, and partnerships. The track equips both new and experienced board members with the knowledge and skills necessary for effective governance through sessions on topics such as policy development, meeting management, ethics, and community engagement. These sessions provide a strong foundation for successful board service.

Selected Resources

1) Communication

- [School PR Strategies in the Age of AI](#)
- [Empowering School Districts to Overcome False Information](#)
- [Elevating Student Voice in School Communications](#)

2) Labor management and relationships with teacher unions

- [Collaborating for Student Success: A Comprehensive, Practical Guidebook for Increasing Shared Decision-Making Through Lasting Partnerships](#)
- [Thriving together: How labor management collaborations fuel educator well-being - New Jersey Education Association](#)
- [Labor-Management Collaboration in Education: The Process, the Impact, and the Prospects for Change](#)
- [Our Impact Improving Educator Well-being | Educators Thriving and Educators Thriving Webinar 2026: Does collaboration matter? | Videos & Movies on Vimeo](#)
- [Walton Family Foundation-Gallup K-12 Teacher Research](#)

3) Partnerships with superintendents

- [Sept-Effective Supt and School Board.pdf](#)
- [Effective Superintendents, Effective Boards: Finding The Right Fit](#)
- [How to hire a school superintendent](#)
- [3 Questions to Help Districts Find the Right Superintendent](#)

4) Other

- [10 Mistakes Board Members Make](#)
- [Key Lessons for Effective School Boards | Bellwether](#)
- [School board governance models and best practices](#)
- [Ballotpedia's School Board Listening Tour - Ballotpedia](#)

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About CPE

The National School Boards Association (NSBA) believes that accurate, objective information is essential to building support for public schools and creating effective programs to prepare all students for success. As NSBA's research branch, the Center for Public Education (CPE) provides objective and timely information about public education and its importance to the well-being of our nation. Launched in 2006, CPE emerged from discussions between NSBA and its member state school boards associations about how to inform the public about the successes and challenges of public education. To serve a wide range of audiences, including parents, teachers, and school leaders, CPE offers research, data, and analysis on current education issues and explores ways to improve student achievement and engage support for public schools.

About NSBA

Founded in 1940, the National School Boards Association's (NSBA) purpose is to ensure each student everywhere has access to excellent and equitable public education governed by high-performing school board leaders and supported by the community.

With members spread across the United States, the Virgin Islands, and Canada, NSBA is the only national organization representing school boards. Along with its member state associations and member public school districts representing locally elected school board officials serving millions of public school students, NSBA believes that public education is a civil right necessary to the dignity and freedom of the American people and that each child, regardless of their ability, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, identity, or citizenship, deserves equitable access to an education that maximizes their individual potential.

For more information, visit nsba.org.



NSBA's Position

NSBA supports strengthening local school board governance and community engagement in public schools and recognizes the many options and choices offered to students in our public schools. NSBA opposes vouchers, tuition tax credits and similar programs, and charter schools not subject to oversight of the local school boards, effectively creating a separate, unaccountable system of publicly funded education that: a) diverts public funding to private schools, private home schools, including virtual schools, regardless of whether they are owned or operated by individuals, religious institutions, not-for-profit entities, or corporations; b) diverts public funds outside of locally elected, locally accountable, representative oversight; and c) often has the effect of re-segregating schools. Public funds should only be used within public schools to advance curricular opportunities, including specialized public school programs authorized by local school boards, such as magnet schools, alternative schools, career and technical education partnerships, advanced placement programs and classes, dual credit programs, postsecondary–high school partnerships, and high school–local business partnerships. NSBA urges full accountability of the use of public funds for educational purposes.

NSBA believes public tax dollars should only support public schools. NSBA opposes any efforts to subsidize tuition or expenses at elementary or secondary private schools, religious schools, or private home/ correspondence schools with public tax dollars. Specifically, NSBA opposes vouchers, tax credits, and tax subsidies for use at nonpublic K-12 schools.

