DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY:
A SPACE FOR SCHOOL BOARDS AND PARENTS
IN PUBLIC EDUCATION POLICYMAKING

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ABSTRACT

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Research indicates that in the No Child Left Behind era of public education, local districts with elected school boards may be perceived as relinquishing control over policies that affect their school system. With the locus of control coming into question, school boards may struggle with how to involve parents in local decision making. Therefore, it is essential that boards of education openly engage parents by exploring and reflecting on how parent voices can influence the policies that govern public schools. This qualitative study examines how, during the course of approximately 10 months, a seven-member school board involves parents at its public meetings during policy-making processes. Specifically, one way for a school board to engage parents in a policy-making process is to employ deliberative democracy. Thus, this is a qualitative inquiry that, through two case studies, examines a school board’s deliberative democratic processes and the parents’ participatory stances during public meetings as policies are established or modified. The purpose of this research is to inform school boards, policymakers, parents, and other educational leaders on how elected school boards can preserve a locus of control in decision-making processes at the local level by engaging parents in policymaking. The primary data collection methods included public meeting observations, a school board survey, and interviews. Findings presented through narratives and thematic analyses reveal scenarios where deliberative democratic tenets were exercised. These tenets included purpose, intent, procedures, practices, and reciprocity. In both case studies, parents adopted various stances such as advocate, proxy agent, and expert. However, throughout the processes, study participants noted tension between formal meeting procedures and their desire for informal dialogue. Limitations included selective homogeneity of participants in deliberative processes, root cause analysis for parent participation, and the challenges of local space. Implications for school boards, parents, and deliberative democracy are discussed. Further areas for research could consider the use of electronic media in deliberative democracy, the presence of affective domains in procedurally-steeped processes, the possibility of micro-deliberative practices, and the leveraging of deliberative democratic processes that reclaim local space.
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Chapter One

Rationale and Framework for Study

Elected school boards in the United States face significant challenges in balancing state and federal mandates, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2003), with the interests of their constituencies, the citizens, including parents, who voted them into office. Despite the fact that NCLB and other federal and state mandates have potentially weakened local control and diluted school board authority, parents, as part of a voting constituency, still expect that the officials they elect to make decisions for a school district will represent their interests. I believe a school board represents parents when it engages them and provides parents the space necessary to have a voice in district policy-making and decision-making processes.

In recent years, though, elected school boards have experienced tension satisfying their parent constituency. As the chief operating officer of a large school district, I hear school board candidates campaign on pledges to meet parent interests, yet once elected, parents criticize them for not keeping promises. Tension grows as parents doubt the agency of the elected education officials, while the school board members feel constrained by external state and federal mandates that may interfere with their intent to serve parents (Mathews, 2006). Public school district governance can mitigate this tension by implementing democratic processes. Because school boards are crucibles of democracy (Berkman & Plutzer, 2005) and, thus, “have the ability to further democracy” (Maeroff, 2010, p. 10), I believe it is incumbent upon them to create opportunities for parents to impact policies that shape education practices in local schools.
Moreover, I believe that broader parent involvement at the district level is crucial because the policies implemented at the school level are generated systemically (Kirst, 2008). If school boards do not involve parents, they run the risk of turning into insensitive bureaucracies that are removed from their constituency. Such bureaucracies can ensure district operations are efficient and well-managed, protect schools from capricious whims of individuals, and establish guidelines that keep school systems legally compliant with outside mandates (Mathews, 2006). Bureaucratic practices can help bring consistency to board operations and systemic decisions; however, the same procedures that school boards use to ensure efficient business practices can appear inflexible, unclear, and daunting to parents who seek a voice at the policy or decision-making table.

School boards, then, must explore how their practices go beyond mere systemic policy governance and engage parents in policymaking processes. These processes can be clearly articulated and implemented in a transparent manner. Also, a school board’s practices can be open to multiple perspectives and recursive in nature. The outcomes of the processes should not be derived through consensus or polling models; rather, they can reflect understandings garnered from multiple perspectives. This means that decisions can be revisited and revised if necessary as constituency needs and contexts change.

Furthermore, given the increasing state and federal mandates in public education, school boards will need to show parents where there is local space to influence policy. And within that space, school boards will have to reflect on how they can create forums for multiple voices of interested parents to be heard. The relationships school boards can build with parents and the policy results they can achieve through direct and personal
exchanges with parents are far more important to parents than a board’s accountability to non-local mandates (Mathews, 2006).

There is plenty of rhetoric around the ability of and need for school boards to establish meaningful working bonds with parents. Yet, I believe that a school system becomes a far more effective organization when its school board involves parents in open exchanges about district policy. School board members can create a space for local authority, agency, discourse, and representation. Thus, they further democracy by keeping their campaign promises to serve parents and by demonstrating their willingness to be accountable to their constituency. An organization, especially one with a pluralistic base like a school district, is solidified and strengthened through this growing democracy.

**Statement of the Problem**

As elected school boards struggle to balance non-local mandates with local constituencies, they may find their locus of control shrinking and challenged by their pluralistic base. In this section, I will discuss this problem and how policy-making processes will need to consider how a school board and various sectors of parents are empowered during the processes.

The possibility of elected school boards involving parents in policymaking is particularly important in an era of NCLB initiatives that appear to be removing local influence from the educational process. The NCLB legislation has disrupted the traditional ideological balance of power in schools, calling into question what is too much or too little involvement from federal government (Anderson L. W., 2005). The mounting demands from NCLB create formal and informal pressure on states to intervene in local school districts (Bulkley, Henig, & Levin, 2010). As states dismiss locally
elected school boards, organize mayoral control of schools, fire school leaders, and take over school systems, local school governance and control is weakened (Fusarelli, 2009). A consequence of weakening control is crowded space where discourse among constituencies once had room.

School boards and parents may rightfully wonder where their locus of control rests if state and federal entities continue to define how local school systems are successful and what happens to them when they are not. School reformer Forster (2011) affirms this notion and further suggests that parents define success, not the institutions that can become all-powerful monopolies. When school boards involve parents in policymaking, they share their power. Parents may even feel empowered to transcend local authority and approach legislative bodies that hold state and federal agencies accountable, and in doing so, give rise to their local voices so as to engage in higher level policy decisions (Greenberger, 2005).

Why should elected school boards even believe parents would want to engage in policy processes? James Morone attributes their motivation to a “democratic wish” for direct participation in politics (Berkman & Plutzer, 2005). While the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 will reveal a variety of historical perceptions about the roles of schools, school boards, and parents, the vast majority of today’s parents see themselves as the first policymakers for their children and believe their “democratic wish” begins at home. Through policy formulation, institutions can facilitate or hinder how citizens’ desires are manifested (Berkman & Plutzer, 2005). Parents want to know in what areas of local school governance their locus of control rests with a board of education; therefore, it is essential that boards openly engage parents, exploring and reflecting on how parent
voices can have influence on and are represented in the policies that govern public schools.

It is not always easy, though, for a school board to share power and deliberate equally when social or economic capital creates imbalances among its constituency. Many parents seeking a voice in school board decisions, like other activists, tend to reflect a higher socioeconomic status, a status that allows their cultural values to be dominant over parents who may have fewer economic resources (Theiss-Morse & Hibbing, 2005). Although low-income parents and neighborhoods can find democratic power by organizing through community, such organization can actually become a source of collusion that empowers middle and upper income parents who monopolize quasi-democratic space to serve the interests of their own children (Anderson G. L., 2009). Thus, sharing decision-making power during policy formulation can best be attained through clearly communicated democratic processes that facilitate deliberation. Also, the processes must provide access for any parents interested in participating.

Governing bodies need to consider how they establish democratic processes that create conditions for deliberation. To accomplish meaningful deliberation that incorporates perspectives from a broad base, Theiss-Morse and Hibbing (2005) caution against creative processes that could be contrived and fail to serve their purpose. Even if effectively designed processes are established to meet a democratic wish and encourage deliberation, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2003) argue such a wish is selective, meaning people want to know democratic processes exist and are present only when they choose to get involved. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse’s notion of a stealth democracy flying below the radar until it is needed suggests citizens may want to avoid politics until convenient
or necessary, but this should not be interpreted as a lack of appreciation for what
democratic processes can accomplish.

Indeed, citizens do emerge from under the radar in response to legislated
directives like NCLB that challenge local control in public school districts. The stealth
democracy has surfaced in response to NCLB because, as John Goodlad (2008) asserts,
the Act is an example of a non-negotiable that severs political democracy. As a means to
reconnect power and people, he makes this strong argument for deliberation: “There is a
void regarding information-seeking queries and debate. The people responsible are
invisible. Schoolwide, districtwide, and statewide test scores take the place of informed
discourse” (p. 22). If the people responsible for creating federal and state mandates are
absent on the local level, school boards can be well positioned to find room within the
legislated policies for local control. And by including parents in local decisions, school
boards now recapture the room they had lost for informed discourse.

Specifically, elected school boards can design public meetings that give parents
the opportunity to engage in deliberation with board members at the district level. The
local school district is the nexus between individual schools and state forces that enforce
mandates such as NCLB. It can be the ideal location to recreate space for discourse,
rebuild a splintered democracy, and realize a relationship between a school board and its
varied parent constituency. As researchers Resnick and Bryant (2008) explain:

Engaged citizens bring much more to the school system than simply letting school
leaders know what is important to the community…. Although parents and others
may be well versed on specific issues- especially those that involve their own
children- they may not understand the big picture or the context in which a
specific issue operates. Convening the community around school issues in a town
meeting or a focus group gives people an opportunity to develop a broader view.
(p. 165)
Here, the school board may best understand the context under which an existing policy was created. The parents may best understand how the policy impacts their children, and depending on the needs of individual children or on the implementation plan in individual schools, children may be experiencing the policy differently. By creating a public and democratic forum for parents, a school board will better be able to understand and respond to the diverse experiences and perspectives of its constituents. With this knowledge and an open line of communication, the board can then adjust its local standards within the context of existing policies.

John Dewey recognized the importance of democracy as a practice that can advance the methods and standards for education. Asserting that democracy transcended a form of government, his philosophies often include words such as method, sharing, process, experience, and play—as in course of action (Dewey, 1944). Dewey saw diversity in views and stimuli as a way to break down barriers associated with various demographics when individuals “participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own” (1944, p. 87). By thoughtfully considering alternative views, school boards that engage parents in democratic policymaking may broaden their perspectives prior to setting policy.

Dewey’s philosophical views about democracy in education, combined with the earlier discussion of contemporary interpretations of what is happening with local school governance in response to state and federal mandates such as NCLB, lead me to explore how an elected school board can engage the district’s parents in local decision making
that involves deliberative democratic practices. This study’s purpose and research questions are addressed in the next section.

**Statement of Purpose and Research Questions**

The focus of this study is on a seven-member elected school board and how it engages parents in policy- and decision-making processes. To understand the processes and practices of this board, this study draws on two cases of parent engagement in the decision-making process. Specifically, one group of parents is affiliated with the Brooke Classical Charter School and the other group of parents researched high school schedule formats. Data collected during this inquiry spanned approximately ten months of public meeting interactions between the board and these sets of parents. The purpose is to examine how the school board’s policies and practices during public meetings engage parents in democratic policy-making processes that encourage deliberation. I also explore the various stances parents assume within deliberative processes and subsequently, how those stances influence policies. This research will help inform school boards, policymakers, parents, and other educational leaders about the locus of control parents can have in decision-making processes at the local level even during periods when increasing state and federal mandates are shrinking local policy-making space. It is anticipated that the knowledge gained from this study will address the perceived problem of increasing state and federal intrusion on local school governance that may be taking decision-making opportunities away from parents. The following overall research question and subquestions guided this study:
In a public school district in which policies are directed increasingly by state and federal bodies, how does an elected school board engage its students’ parents in the District’s local decision-making processes?

1) What are the parameters and practices an elected school board establishes for parental participation in decision-making processes?
2) What participatory stances do parents take as they participate in decision-making processes?
3) How do decision-making processes enacted between the school board and parents demonstrate tenets of deliberative democracy?

These questions aim to bring forward important aspects of public deliberations that take place between school boards and parents. First, the school board’s parameters and practices for parent participation at meetings demonstrate how a board enacts its intent. Second, this study reveals how parents assume various participatory stances as they position themselves within those parameters and practices. Last, the data suggests there is space at public meetings for a school board and parents to engage in deliberative democracy.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework I use to support my research questions embeds an elected school board’s practices and its parents’ participatory stances within deliberative democracy theory. I started with Morone’s concept of citizens holding a democratic wish for direct participation in political processes (Berkman & Plutzer, 2005). Extending this concept, I believe school boards want parents to impact policies and practices in their children’s school district. Next, I thought about how school boards could engage parents
in a democratic process. Influential parent involvement cannot happen without thoughtful consideration given to how participation stances might look and in what context. This is where I found deliberative democracy to be the frame that united wish, process, practice, and stance.

Morone (2003) offers several visions for how United States citizens might represent themselves in deliberative political processes. His ideas include advocacy, advisory, and mobilizing stances. Advocates are those who unite under a common cause they want to advance. Advisors assemble to give feedback and advice. Mobilizers typically are citizens who rise up against an establishment because they have too often been overlooked or marginalized. While these stances do not immediately bring to mind an invited partnership with a decision-making entity, they each have the ability to impact policy formulation processes because there is a direct connection to or influence on the policymakers.

Not all citizens have the luxury of direct interaction with policymakers. In such cases, they may need to rely on proxies for agency. Pache and Santos (2010) believe that the emergent agency is related to the degree to which a person is dissatisfied with an organization and can result in avoidance, compromise, or avoidance. Bandura (2001), a noted social cognitive theorist, suggests some people do not have direct control over social conditions and institutional practices that affect their everyday life; therefore, they may exercise proxy agency. Social sciences perspectives are helpful in understanding how people who want to influence outcomes can seek leverage. Thus, parents who want such leverage with school boards may seek alternatives to direct interaction with policymakers.
Linking policy reform, citizen involvement, and school board leadership, Kowalski (2008) contends local school district governance should facilitate deliberative democracy, a process in which school board leadership and stakeholders use interpersonal communication to collaborate on visions and plans. Process comes to the forefront in deliberative democracy because it justifies the positions of citizens and their elected representatives, and in working together, they “give one another reasons that are mutually acceptable and generally accessible, with the aim of reaching conclusions that are binding in the present on all citizens but open to challenge in the future” (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, p. 7). Elaborating further, Gutmann and Thompson believe deliberative democracy creates space for many decision-making stances as long as a process is followed.

Based on the sources in this section that have outlined various ways citizens participate in deliberative democracy processes with policymakers, combined with the following literature review that provides further rationale for deliberative democratic processes in public education policymaking, I developed a concept map, which evolved throughout my study to reflect my real-time findings about process, participatory stances, and means of presenting and sharing information. The current version of that map reflects what I have found to be true about the relationships between parents and school boards and the way they engage in policymaking and decision making (see Appendix A).

A deliberative democratic process frames three commonly referenced participatory stances found in the literature: advocate, proxy agent, and expert. These stances reflect the roles parents play in the decision-making process. The roles are influential and impact school system policies and practices. Because the policies and practices in a
deliberative model are open to revision, the process a school board enacts with its parents during policy formulation is recursive. Within the context of this framework, I explore when and how a school board did or did not enact deliberative democracy. I also examine which instances the school board was open to parent deliberation and what outcomes occurred.
Chapter Two

Literature Review

This literature review is organized in six sections. Through an examination of the historical context for school board and parent relationships, the first section provides support for the contention that parents want to be actively involved in their local district’s decision-making processes. The literature in section two demonstrates examples of alternatives to local school board control when parents are dissatisfied with traditional local governance, revealing that the governing body is not as important as the democratic process. The third segment describes how deliberative democratic processes frame practices that consider multiple voices, thus, confirming that multiple participatory stances can exist within a supportive structure. I apply these practices and stances in the conceptual framework for this study. The literature in the fourth section explores the importance of position and purpose in policymaking. Because school board meetings can be challenging places for democracy, the fifth portion focuses on this dilemma. The final section of the literature review details a limited number of studies that explore perceptions of and interactions between school boards and parents. While they do not show how school boards exclusively use deliberative democracy with parents during decision-making processes, the studies leave open the possibility for deliberative practices during policymaking.

Historical Context for Board of Education and Parent Relationships

This section touches upon the most salient historical perspectives involving parents and school boards, beginning with the local autonomy of the first elected boards
and ending with the perceived lack of autonomy experienced by current boards that must answer to state and federal mandates in the No Child Left Behind era.

Tracing back to Germanic influences that defined the individual as a self-absorbed irrational being who should submit freely to the educative discipline of the state, American common schools have their roots in Protestant social reform (Dewey, 1944). Parents were subordinate to the state and would not have had the opportunity to influence local educational policy for their children. In the early 1800s, communities in Massachusetts were among the first to establish elected school boards where the local community had voting privileges, oversaw school finances, and trusted local government to meet educational needs (Land, 2002). Although the number of local school boards spread, and public dialogue about the virtues of liberty abounded (Kowalski, 2008), parents were not widely involved in education policymaking.

The policymakers of the time assumed that parents, especially blue collar workers, did not care to be involved in education that was for the good of the republic (Kaestle, 1983). Belying this notion was the Hesperian movement that occurred in Michigan during the 1880s. With rural parents and educators believing parental involvement in school policymaking was legitimate (Cutler, 2000), this movement was the exception. Historian Carl Kaestle (1983) described parents’ retreat from local involvement and highlighted the consequence of this trend: “The eventual price that they paid was the loss of authority and control over their children’s education” (p. 160). Despite parents’ loss of control and retreat, authorities controlling education would experience continued challenges from their constituencies.
Such retreat made it easy for scholars like Elwood Cubberly, a supporter of Horace Mann, to declare in 1916 that professional businessmen could serve on school boards that established policy, while leaving operational decisions to administrators (Mountford, 2008). The urban elite on the local level then enjoyed three decades of decision making (Kirst, 2004), even as progressives accused them of using coalitions that incited corruption and partisanship (Kirst, 2008; Glass, 2008). The professionals saw themselves as good citizens who could represent their constituents, but parents still did not have direct involvement in establishing educational policies.

Parents in the mid-1900s who sought a way to be involved in school governance found the Parent Teacher Association to be an access point to schools, but their participation had more to do with supporting administrators than impacting policymaking (Kirst, 2004). Their role may have been limited by state and federal education agency action to remove power and policy-making decisions from local school board in response to a decline in student scores in math and science during the 1940s and 1950s (Mountford, 2008). With weakening local governance and growing federal involvement, parents had little opportunity to exert influence in their jurisdictions.

Parents in school districts that continued to have lagging student achievement in the 1970s mobilized and confronted their local boards with popular demands for them to be more socially representative and better in touch with neighborhood needs (Cibulka, 2001). In Philadelphia, the Parent Union for Public Schools united to exert power over the school board’s funding policies for school systems, a successful campaign that inspired parents in Harlem to mount a similar challenge to school board action (Cutler, 2000). By the 1980s, when many school districts, especially those in urban areas, had
failed to show substantive positive change, state and federal agencies saw their education excellence movement as the answer to school boards that had failed to take proactive roles in reform (Land, 2002). The most recent decades of educational governance have revealed a blended approach to policymaking. A hybrid model emerged in many districts, exhibiting a tension between the democratic governance that reflected the will of the community and the notion that school operations needed to be left to experts under the direction of the superintendent (Tracy, 2010).

The patterns revealed in the literature raise an important question: If school boards do not actively listen to and engage parents in decisions that impact district policies, will they continue to experience parental retreat, lack of confidence, revolts, and abandonment? Schools are responsible for implementing and practicing the policies approved by the local school board, so parents who want to impact change must leverage their influence at the district level, not just at the school level.

Even parents who seek and gain influence at the district level will not always be satisfied with the outcomes school boards enact. These parents seek a variety of alternatives. I will now turn to literature that reveals contemporary stand-ins for traditional governance structures that emerge when these dissatisfied parents and community members act.

**Alternatives to Board of Education Control**

As local school districts cede control in the wake of national standards, parents and non-local policymakers may conclude that community-elected school boards are not needed to set policy. Gerstner (2008) believes such, acknowledging islands of excellence, but arguing that the quantity of local school boards in the United States is
excessive and the quality too varied. Because school boards fail to make the systemic change needed in public education, Gerstner asserts that parents react and local control is ceded to other governing bodies.

While there is little literature to demonstrate how elected boards of education involve parents in democratic processes for local policymaking (Marsh, 2011; Tracy, 2010), it is evident that parents can be influential in exacting consequences on elected school boards that do not meet their expectations. According to Conley (2003), founder of the Center for Educational Policy Research, parents can show their dissatisfaction with boards by waging protests that may not influence policies but, instead, delay legislative action. Protesting parents, according to Conley, do not lead reform, but they may constrain or guide the evolution of reforms that may occur beyond them with other governing bodies.

Mayoral control is an alternate governance model. Henig (2009) notes mayoral control of public education existed prior to the early 20th century’s Progressive Reform Era; while this form of governance is not new, it is again emerging as an alternative to public school boards as exemplified this past decade in New York City public schools. The experience in New York City demonstrates that the potential for effective deliberative democratic processes in a mayoral control model is contingent upon the mayor’s willingness to accept checks on his or her power. A local Panel on Educational Policy had provided just such a check in New York, via a venue for public input, but the mayor’s autocratic style limited public forums, obscured democratic processes, and resulted in the public losing its voice in important decisions (Ravitch & Weingarten,
By taking the public out of public education, the mayor effectively sidelined democratic processes (Ravitch, 2010).

Outsourcing school system control to vendors is another alternative to local board control, but involving more people or larger entities is not a more effective means of increasing public engagement in policymaking. Various private sector arrangements include portfolio management models, diverse provider models, and public-private hybrids (Bulkley, Henig, & Levin, 2010; Gold, Christman, & Herold, 2007). A 2001 case study of private sector and civic groups that managed or provided services to Philadelphia schools revealed that alternative governance bodies had little room for innovation under mandated policies such as NCLB. Indeed, under such arrangements, rather than districts demonstrating accountability to parents, community-organized groups were accountable to the district (Gold, et al., 2007). Therefore, changing who is in control of a school system does not necessarily guarantee that the new governing body will effectively engage parents in democratic processes for policymaking.

The literature showing alternatives to school board governance when parental involvement diminishes does not bode well for deliberative democracy. Not only can parents retreat, school boards that have tried to build coalitions with community groups have failed to meet expectations and build trust, resulting in school officials retreating from the communities who reach out to them (Mathews, 2006). Policymaking involves multiple constituencies who can share in the ownership and processes. Policies are best formulated when all who are impacted by the policy have an opportunity to share perspectives, explain positions, make reasoned arguments, and show openness to opposing viewpoints, all of which are characteristic of deliberative democratic practices.
Citizens have a right to participate in government, and with elected school boards, parents have an even greater interest in their views being represented in policy. The literature suggests education policymakers, be they elected boards or alternative governance bodies, should build and maintain forums that preserve democratic practices which allow parents to deliberate in processes that impact policies. The next section will frame such practices within the concept of deliberative democracy.

**Deliberative Democracy: Practices and Roles for Multiple Voices**

The trending nationalization of education policy has resulted in a shift of how policy discussions are conducted. Seeking compromise around big ideas, special interest and advocacy groups engage in pluralist bargaining, which means local policymakers may not appear to be as beholden to members who elected them (Cibulka, 2001). Therefore, pluralism’s challenges make it difficult for school boards to support different communities and recognize group differences (Gaskell, 2001). Community pressures can be significant, and in a pluralistic society, it is difficult to balance rights (Shariff & Shariff, 2006). Deliberative democracy provides one framework that can help school boards strike that balance. The literature in this section addresses this framework from three angles: how various theorists define deliberative democratic practices, structures, and participant roles; what justification of position means; and how multiple voices can be heard.

Deliberative democracy is designed to work toward solutions for a common good. Perspectives can change as ideas are shared. Mansbridge, et al. (2010) suggest deliberations can cause participants to adopt others’ interests as their own. Those leading the deliberations can create processes that are transformative in nature:
Citizens are entitled to make claims on their institutions to advance their interests (provided these interests fall within the range permitted by the broad constraints of human rights and morality and the deliberative constraints that run from mutual respect through mutual justification). (Mansbridge, et al., 2010, p. 77)

The transformation occurs as individuals, who initially hold fast to their own interests, can develop a reciprocal understanding of different views. The aim for school boards, then, is to create democratic processes that engage parents so that all parties learn from each other and find common ground through deliberation. For a school board, the goal of public engagement means securing a commitment to quality education for all children, rather than for parents’ individual children (Voke, 2002).

The wider the range of parents facing policymakers, the broader and more diverse the issues are, carrying both benefits and challenges inherent to a democratic society. Because the parental publics are multiple, appearing on local, state, and national levels, public leaders must recognize that democratic processes which allow individual views to exist in a pluralist society can be messy (Nathan, 2004). Some school boards are praised for their procedural messiness, while other school boards question the merits of a messy democracy (Charney, 2009). Given this tension, how can policy-making school boards keep democracy alive with practices and processes that allow deliberation between and among competing interests of parents and the board itself?

There is a general consensus across the literature regarding the definition of deliberative democracy. It is a process that is well-reasoned, non-coercive, other-regarding, binding, public, and reflective (Chappell, 2012; Dryzek & Hendriks, 2012; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Marsh, 2011). Most importantly, though, reciprocity is a
major tenet of deliberative democratic practice. Gutmann and Thompson (2002) liken it to scientific inquiry:

Reciprocity is to justice in political ethics what replication is to truth in scientific ethics. A finding of truth in science requires replicability, which calls for public demonstration. A finding of justice in political ethics requires reciprocity, which calls for public deliberation (p. 159).

Achieving reciprocity through deliberation can fulfill logical steps characteristic of scientific inquiry. Those who deliberate publicly must be well-reasoned in their argument. Here, well-reasoned does not mean giving explanations with which others can agree; rather, reasonable individuals are “willing to engage in debate, offer public justifications for preferences and reflect on their positions” (Chappell, 2012, p. 8).

Opposing parties can generate more powerful and tangible outcomes if they state a position accompanied with an effectively articulated rationale. Gutmann and Thompson (2004), noted experts in deliberative democratic philosophy, hinge their argument on justification and the expectation that deliberation will be influential on the governing body making the final decision. Mutual understanding can be attained in deliberative democracy when positions are justified, when citizens have public access to deliberations, and when a binding decision has been reached as the result of deliberative influences (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). When applied to public meetings involving parents and school boards, all parties would need to justify their stances and be respectful of opposing views to attain mutual understanding.

Deliberative democratic practices should respect processes that invite community members to bring forward their expertise and insights in support of their positions. The processes should allow citizens to state positions, justify reasons, question convention,
listen to opposition, and respect differences (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). Policymakers on the local level, such as elected boards of education, will benefit from the practice if they are “willing to submit their own cherished beliefs (even ‘progressive’ ones) to examination when their students and communities question them” (Anderson, Herr, & Sigrid Nihlen, 2007, p. 55). Parents will need to justify why they question school board policies; if school boards allow parents to be part of public forums where issues affecting schools and the community can be deliberated, they can “weigh various options for action against the likely consequences of those actions for the things that are deeply valuable to them” (Mathews, 2008, p. 563). Deliberating over what is valued may sound like an emotional appeal, but parents’ expertise and insights can help justify their opinions. Regardless of the boards’ or parents’ standpoints and rationales, their divergence is exactly what gives rise to multiple voices participating in a deliberative process.

Discord and division can advance democratic aims, particularly when citizens are engaged for the common good and when their debate is expanded with a range of voices (Levstik & Barton, 2001). Such a process is known as participatory democracy. Parker (2003) further reminds us that participation goes beyond spectatorship and requires citizens to have direct and cooperative involvement for a participatory democracy. Given the inherent tension in asking citizens with competing interests to come together cooperatively, how can the deliberation be transformative as suggested by earlier literature? To explain this paradox, Wineburg (1999) notes that what allows us to know others is our distrust of our capacity to know them, and that the contradictions we see in others may tell us more about ourselves (p. 498). Therefore, deliberation can be most
productive during a process through which participants can understand common and conflicting interests (Karpowitz & Mansbridge, 2005).

These deliberative democratic processes, according to Bachtiger, Niemeyer, Neblo, Steenbergen, and Steiner (2010), have evolved since the theory first gained momentum in the 1980s. They believe Type I deliberation reflects the original Habermasian model of communicative action which is grounded in strong procedural elements. Bachtiger et al. (2010) focus on a process that is rational and justified, the outcome of which is consensus. In contrast, Type II deliberation, more characteristic of Gutmann and Thompson, stresses deliberative institutions and outcomes. The process includes all forms of communication, such as emotional and narrative, not just those that are rational and reasoned. While Bachtiger, et al. (2010) theorized about deliberative democratic processes, I now turn to a practitioner who offered suggestions for deliberative processes.

Harris Sokoloff, a recognized expert in engaging parents in school district issues and executive director at the Center for School Study Councils, has said school boards do not have deliberative forums; instead, they have microphones for the community to give public comment (personal communication, February 11, 2012). If the opportunity that school boards provide is as limited as Sokoloff described, how can they hear multiple voices? To meet this need, Sokoloff (1996) proposed creating structured forums, moderated by a neutral party, that encourage public deliberation. Such approaches can calm tensions and promote civility without discouraging the expression of opposing viewpoints valuable to a democratic process.
Others have examined the importance of a thoughtful method for ensuring a variety of viewpoints. A compelling study spanning nine states exemplified how a strategic process can successfully bring together multiple voices to participate in deliberative democracy. The Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) created a town meeting project in 1995 to study what could happen if forums for deliberation were encouraged between parents and public school leaders. IEL’s approach emphasized citizen deliberation in order to build common ground, and with a focus group, explored the topic of parent involvement (Danzberger & Friedman, 1997). Following the deliberation, 75% of participants felt there was merit in arguments that opposed their own positions, and 93% thought a diverse participant base was useful. The results suggest that participants valued a democratic process that could bring varied people and opinions together.

Likewise, the process of creating an effective deliberative space proved crucial as the Chicago Public Schools district experienced tension between parents and school officials before their deliberative processes yielded positive change. In the mid-1990s, an empirical study involving researchers from the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern University found that deliberative forums implemented by school reform legislation drew active citizen participation (Fung, 2003). Fung’s analysis showed various drawbacks that occurred as parents and bureaucrats came together: officials deliberated with each other when citizen participation was low; deliberation led to decision-making paralysis; imbalance of power or resources among deliberants led to political maneuvering. However, when external measures were taken to structure and facilitate deliberations, Fung (2003) asserts that these differences were overcome. An
Office of Accountability contributed to improved deliberations at local levels by providing resources, training, and process coordination. Chicago’s case, as well as the other deliberative democratic experiences shared in this section, reveals the importance of a well-executed approach that can bring divergent constituents together in a productive manner that is respectful of multiple voices.

Beyond creating forums and processes that can bring divergent groups to mutual understanding, the structures a school board puts in place can greatly enhance or hinder deliberative democracy. Dryzek and Hendriks (2012) found an array of factors influencing deliberative forums, but they narrowed their findings to the following: time, agenda, rules, facilitation, task, publicity, structural context, and size. Among those, agendas and rules appeared to be the factors that could most constrain participants. An agenda cannot be so open that participants lack focus, but one that is too tight can constrain the degree of deliberation and make participants suspect predetermined outcomes. While crucial to ensure collective output, rules for how to collectively reason are often unfamiliar to participants. A number of researchers concerned with deliberative processes believe the best rules are those that are developed by participants themselves (Dryzek & Hendriks, 2012; Mathews, 2006).

Despite a general consensus in the literature that parents should be involved in deliberative decision-making processes, the how of engaging the public in policy formulation becomes a core consideration. The following section will underscore how policymakers can create position and purpose for parents to be included in policy formulation.
Position and Purpose in Policy Formulation

Effective policy formulation is rooted in decision-making processes that include research and public participation. As part of the process, policymakers should consider who makes the final decision, who is involved, and when the decision should be made (Morgan, 2006). The old politics of public education were highly parochial, but federal and state mandates have changed the local landscape, and new expectations for how local school boards create policy have dramatically increased (Cibulka, 2001). Before the policy formulation process can begin, it is helpful to understand where expertise, position, and purpose lie within a democratic practice that involves the community, along with exploring the reasons why the public wishes to engage in the process.

The literature shows us that various constituents can come forward to deliberate and justify their positions, and each can have specialized knowledge or understanding. Therefore, school boards wanting to have parents seated at the table with them to debate and decide policies should not restrict their policy-making processes to traditional experts such as staff members and consultants (Wadsworth, 1997). “Experts” on policy-making committees have been found to have limited influence on policymaking when there are issues that have broad importance to the general public (Brint, 1990). Likewise, Peterson and Short (2001) found public opinion carries as much or more weight than professionals’ expertise when a board of education is addressing publicly visible or external matters such as facilities, school construction, and finance. While a study conducted by the Institute for Educational Leadership found that community members’ expertise about policy is not as important as being invited to a process and having the accessibility to public meetings (Danzberger & Friedman, 1997), it still stands to bear
that a participant’s expertise or understanding of the topic at hand, not of the policy process, is relevant. Therefore, a school board interested in deliberative democratic processes can create accessible avenues that invite parents and other non-traditional policymakers to share their expertise.

Once stakeholders such as parents are positioned at the table with policymakers, there are a variety of participatory stances they can take. These roles can be as varied as the perspectives being shared, as noted in the introduction of this paper. Participants can be researchers, campaigners, educators, mobilizers, advocates, advisors, and proxy agents (Bandura, 2001; Dryzek & Hendriks, 2012; Morone, 2003). Some participants can be self-selected activists with many resources, while others, who may struggle to be open-minded, represent special interests or areas of expertise (Dryzek & Hendriks, 2012).

Another recognized participatory stance may be a dissenter who objects to a proposal that appears to be generalized, autocratic, or unfair. Policymakers who try to standardize policy in an attempt to provide consistency or unification may encounter pushback from local constituencies, causing simultaneous disunification among them; yet, it is this tension that helps keep policy formulation processes both fluid and stable (Schultz & Fecho, 2005). Since one purpose of deliberative democracy is to correct mistakes or misunderstandings (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004), policy formulation within this framework can be a dynamic and recursive process that stabilizes for implementation but remains open for continued action. Indeed, this is the same tension that exemplifies a system of checks and balances, a fundamental democratic principle, suggesting that parents and school boards with diverse views can be accountable and responsive to the policies that are created for the district.
Another participatory stance a parent may adopt is as an engager in social intercourse. Community education specialist Ross Zerchykov (1984) offered this role as a possibility for citizen involvement in policy formulation. “Engagers” have two reasons for being involved: 1) relational, meaning citizens want to feel a board is accessible and is responsive because its policies are beneficial to them, or 2) interactional, meaning citizens appreciate the favorable reactions a board has to their petitions and presentations. Both of these reasons support the expectations for accessibility and action characteristic of deliberative democracy.

Lobbying is yet another participatory stance that parents may practice with school boards during policy formulation processes. In this context, lobbying is defined as a strategic practice whereby an issue is framed in order to control the deliberation (McGrath, 2007). Competing interest groups use lobbying to influence policies in their favor. While lobbying is certainly prevalent at the federal level – Gabel and Clifford (2011, p. 90) found that education lobbyists expended 826.19 billion dollars from 2000 to 2010 – lobbying also occurs at grassroots local levels to encourage more people to become active participants in political processes that result in building goodwill.

This research presented on policy formulation demonstrates the importance of position and purpose of those engaged in deliberative democratic process. While the larger social interests and contexts provide access points for parents to engage in dialogue with school boards, it is important to note that the positions and purposes for parent involvement extend beyond participation. They include access, expertise, deliberation, and accountability. As discussed earlier, participants in a deliberative democracy process have an expectation that their input results in action. Most often, the action and outcomes
for this process occur at the local level. It is to the importance of locality for democratic school boards I now turn.

**Local School Boards: Challenging Places for Democracy**

Elected school boards have an obligation to serve their voting public, and in numerous statements made in public meetings during this past year by the elected officials in my school district, they almost always define their electorate as parents who have students in the local public school system. Conley (2003) believes local boards are closest to the community, and therefore, “are one of the most grass-roots levels of democratic participation in the American political system” (p. 150). Taken a step further, Berkman and Plutzer’s (2005) findings suggest school boards are idealized as crucibles of democracy because there is a high correspondence between what citizens want and get (p. 156). Given these positions, parents should be able to participate in democratic processes facilitated by their local school boards; however, the literature will also show how the local locus of control with school boards is experiencing tension while trying to meet parents’ expectations.

Local is important as it separates school boards from state and federal institutions. “Localness” involves communicative demands on elected board members because there are not multiple political layers and offices; there is an expectation for accessibility and responsiveness (Tracy, 2010, p. 11). Thus, just as my own school board has confirmed, policymakers are more likely to be responsive to those within their geographic electorate. Because constituents on a local level are geographically and psychologically closer to their school boards than they are to federal or state policymakers, they are better able to promote democracy and influence education policy on the local level (Kirst, 2004).
Mathematically speaking, there are more elected school board members than there are state senators, delegates, and governors, so school boards, more than any other elected officials, have a strong local presence (Berkman & Plutzer, 2005; Maeroff, 2011). Consequently, Maeroff (2011) contends school boards are in fact the ultimate expression of American democracy because schools are operated by the people for the people; in turn, boards can promote democracy when they give parents the opportunity for input.

Even though local school boards can be democratic spaces for parents, they do not always fulfill democratic ideals. Involving parents in policymaking is challenging work. Although boards can be democratic when they are run by and for the parents, attempts to broaden the constituent base—the clientele being served—can be unsuccessful (Martin, 1970). In his 2003 analysis of deliberative democracy used in the Chicago Public Schools, Fung found that initial high levels of citizen involvement with school officials dwindled to a smaller group of families that tended to be more educated and employed when compared to others in their neighborhood. To prevent a shrinking local democracy, board members need to use their power of office to develop and enlarge their constituency so it lasts for the time it takes to develop policies that affect change (Sarason, 1996). In seeking a democratic ideal, boards also face challenges in ensuring a broad variety of parents are represented, especially with regard to socioeconomic demographics. Parent participation in policymaking can be a powerful form of democracy for low-income neighborhoods, but the same democratic process can lead to collusion among middle to upper income parents who advocate for their own children’s interests (Anderson G. L., 2009).
Given these challenges, some attack the current public school structure. Chubb and Moe (1990a), for example, assert that democracy does not require school board control; rather, they propose that school boards be eliminated and their authority reassigned to parents, schools, and students to govern themselves as they want. For those with similar interests, the notion of choice is then seen as a simplified alternative to school boards that struggle to meet pluralistic desires. While Chubb and Moe would blame overloaded school board bureaucracies for being unresponsive to constituents, resulting in decreased student performance in school systems, an empirical study of over 1000 school districts conducted by Meier, Polinard, and Wrinkle (2000) suggests that competing goals from constituents, while limiting, can still result in democratic responsiveness from school boards. These democratic challenges for local boards are not always limited, though, to constituent circumstances; they can also be a factor of state or federal intrusion.

Federally legislated policies such as NCLB and Race to the Top initiatives are threatening parents’ ability to be involved in school policymaking because the actors and actions behind these mandates are taking place far removed from the local level. Parents should be afforded the opportunity to stand in relationship to policy formulation if their children’s schools are going to be affected by the policy (Sarason, 1997), but few parents can overcome barriers of time, ability, and geography to advance to state and national policy-making arenas. The result is a reduced scope for local decision making and greater limitations on formal ways for parents to influence policy (Sliwka & Istance, 2006). Since the American education system was designed with local control in mind, it is difficult for school boards to implement state and federal policies generated centrally.
Conley, 2003). Consequently, parents have similar difficulty accepting top-down policies in which they had no say.

Not only can policies generated outside a local school district’s jurisdiction serve as barriers for parents who want to influence education policy, the ability for parents to have a direct influence on a school board’s policy decisions can be limited depending on the governance model being used. Many urban areas such as Chicago and New York have changed the governing role of school boards, and rather than acting as delegates for whom they represent, school boards operate as a policy-setting bodies that leave operational discretion to the district’s superintendent or CEO (Cibulka, 2001). One proponent of this strategy is Carver (2012), whose Policy Governance theory espouses a hierarchical structure where a board’s decision making rests at the policy level, not an operational level. In other words, the accountability for which the board is responsible focuses on ends, not means. Boards conduct board business at their meetings and leave implementation matters to staff.

This is not to say Policy Governance ignores community input. A school board is still expected to have a process that is responsive to and respectful of community concerns. Parents in the school community can become involved in linkage meetings where a school board listens to their concerns as an opportunity for input, but the deliberation occurs later among board members and does not directly involve the community (Maloney, 2006). The debate is still public, though, so that citizens can be assured the board listened to their ideas. “When the public sees the members of the board doing important work, engaging in vigorous deliberations, and supporting each other in finding common values, it will have confidence in both the board and the board’s chosen
processes” (Dawson & Quinn, 2004, p. 3). While the Policy Governance model is just one policy-making approach a board could practice, once initial community consultation is complete, two way communication is then limited to those in charge of the school system.

If parents only seek buy-in on the “ends” that emerge from school system policy development, then Carver’s (2009) contention that centralized control is more effective than local control would hold merit. Yet, as the literature has shown us, parents want more than a limited consultative role; they want an open, active and direct role in policymaking, including the operational means. School boards and parents could seek new opportunities for creating, maintaining, and influencing local policies rather than bemoaning intrusion from higher authorities. Redefining how local school boards can still involve parents in policymaking will be important as jurisdictions await the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

While this study examines a school board’s deliberative democratic processes and the parents’ participatory stances during public meetings when policies are made, the literature describes a tentative future for public school boards. As they balance state and federal mandates with local parents’ expectations, school boards will continue to be challenging places for democracy to thrive. A shared understanding of democratic policy-making processes appears to be a crucial element; according to Heyneman (2001, p. 10) an education system in a democracy needs to be supported by a public who knows more about how a system works; with that expanded knowledge, a new kind of education policy could emerge. Regardless if the value placed in localized policy-making control stays intact, or the opportunities for local policymaking are redefined, elected boards of
education must establish and communicate the processes they will use for policymaking and how they plan to involve parents. However, to gauge the success of any future efforts, we must first understand if school boards currently have processes for parents to be involved in policymaking.

There is abundant research on parental involvement with schools, but scant studies on how boards of education engage parents in policymaking, particularly in the arena of deliberative democracy. Tracey (2010) indicated studies of school boards as sites of democratic politics and governance are rare. Likewise, Marsh (2011) found little research that tested deliberative democracy in education settings. Finally, I asked Frederick Hess, a leading expert in education policy, for studies specific to parent influence on boards or board processes with parents, and he said, “There is nothing out there” (F. Hess, personal communication, July 12, 2011). Clearly, it is important to fill this informational void on parental influences on local school board policymaking; doing so may address the problem of how parents can retain a locus of control on education policy that is increasingly directed by state and federal authorities. With this in mind, the final section of this review will explore perceptual data about the relationship between school boards and parents, as well as summarize findings from two case studies regarding school boards’ democratic practices.

**Boards of Education and Parents: Believing and Doing**

The literature has shown school boards have a long history of governance in our nation, and they have long worked with parents in their local districts. Is there a need to preserve school boards in contemporary America so they can continue to work locally with parents? According to studies conducted by and the *Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup Poll*
(Bushaw & Lopez, 2011), the National School Boards Association (NSBA) (School Boards Circa 2010: Governance in the Accountability Era, 2010), and the Iowa School Boards Foundation (Delagardelle, 2008), the answer to the question is yes. Additionally, studies conducted by Tracy (2010) and Marsh (2011) discuss how boards are able to use democratic practices when engaging their parents in local policies.

As stated earlier, local influence on decision making for schools is important to parents when they are faced with increasing state and federal mandates. Phi Delta Kappan and the Gallup organization partnered in an annual report on the public’s attitudes toward public schools (Bushaw & Lopez, 2011). For the first time since 1984, respondents were asked to grade teachers, parents, administrators, and school boards. Results were the same both times, showing higher marks for local teachers and administrators compared to only 37% of school boards and 36% parents receiving an A or B (p. 19). When respondents graded schools, their local schools overwhelmingly received higher marks than schools elsewhere in the community or nation. While policymaking was not a focus in this study, results may still be helpful in understanding how school boards and parents are perceived; plus, since the public gave higher marks to local schools and their leaders, the results reinforce the importance of locality.

In a NSBA report (School Boards Circa 2010: Governance in the Accountability Era, 2010), Hess and Weeks described that school boards see themselves playing an increasingly important role in the wake of NCLB legislation that appears to be syphoning local control away from school districts. Surprisingly, though, boards do not prioritize the satisfaction of or the need to engage what could be a large power base, parents. In the survey sample drawn from 7,100 districts, 15.7% of respondents perceived the need to
boost community engagement or parent involvement as somewhat or not at all urgent. Similarly, parental satisfaction was the only criterion that fewer than 70% of board members ranked as extremely or very important. This lackluster recognition by boards of parental influence prompted me to look at the NSBA Code of Ethics (2011) to see how much parental involvement in policy setting is emphasized. The Code includes a broad statement about seeking systematic communication with all segments of the community, but there is no explicit mention of parents. Additionally, with regard to policy, NSBA instructs only that boards should make a policy decision after a full discussion at a public board meeting (NSBA Code of Ethics, 2011, p. 1). Discussion is not defined, and there is no mention of deliberative processes. I believe this information suggests two dynamics: 1) that parents are marginalized in policy-making processes and 2) parents can be “safely” lumped within a broader community category so as to limit their voice and role as parents of children in the district. While the NSBA report established that school boards still matter, how do elected school boards make parents matter in policy-making processes?

Other recent studies do not clearly answer this question. Indeed, parents were similarly lumped with community in a ten-year study beginning in 1998 conducted by the Iowa School Boards Foundation, which came to the same conclusion as the NSBA study – local school boards matter (Delagardelle, 2008). A more promising finding regarding the importance of parent engagement in a board’s policymaking emerges from the Lighthouse Inquiry. During the second component of its multiphase study, the Inquiry examined five school districts in a Midwest state from 2002-2007 to see how school boards influence conditions for success that improve school achievement. Connecting
with the community and building the public will to improve achievement was identified as a key area for school board performance. Boards also are expected to understand their roles; understand there are different ways to involve the community with information, input, involvement, and engagement; and believe the community is a partner in decision making (Delagardelle, 2008, p. 220). Despite some clarity on board roles and expectations, the Lighthouse Inquiry did not uncover specific processes for deliberation and decision making tied specifically to parents. However, of significant note was a finding that school board members realized that “policies to guide and sustain the district work to improve achievement required a more deliberative process than the policy development process they used for existing policies” (Delagardelle, 2008, p. 214).

Interestingly, the recommended deliberative policy development practices were limited to board member deliberation, rather than parents. I will next turn to two case studies that specifically included parents in school board deliberations with a focus on democratic practices.

The first, a case study of Colorado’s Boulder Valley School District, examined discourse practices at 63 public school board meetings held from 1996-1999. Tracy’s (2010) study employed a grounded practical theory approach. She analyzed meeting transcripts and conducted 18 interviews that included school board members, district staff, higher education officials, and a journalist who covered board meetings. She framed her findings within a term she coined ordinary democracy, a practice that commonly occurs in local governance and is prototypical of school boards. Not only did Tracy find dissonance on what democracy meant to school community members, she found citizens experiencing communicative challenges such as feeling comfortable...
speaking out and speaking passionately. In Tracy’s conclusion, she found reasonable hostility, a criticism that marries argument and emotion, to be an important ideal for the practice of ordinary democracy. It is here that Tracy argued deliberative democracy, defined by her as a normative ideal that applies across situations, could have a negative effect on ordinary democracy because it would alienate participants from using honest and emotional discourse.

A later comparative case study of two California school districts with elected board members, conducted between 1998-2000, sought to uncover how two school districts who engaged representative groups of constituents in reason-based decision making achieved widely disparate results. Marsh (2011) coded and analyzed data from formal and informal meetings, documents, archival records, and over 100 interviews and focus groups that included school board members, administrators, parents, citizens, teachers and students. Both school districts had collective conversations with community members about decisions for the common good of students. The deliberations, according to Marsh, were public, reciprocal, reasoned, accountable, and actionable, all hallmarks of deliberative democracy as shown by previous literature. One district was more successful in its deliberative practices than the other because its organizational structure was flatter and its operating procedures were more flexible. Marsh’s study had several lessons for school districts wishing to use deliberative democracy: 1) be mindful of who is involved and how representation is constructed; 2) structure processes to achieve deliberative means and ends; 3) apply thoughtful pedagogy and grouping strategies; 4) use data as a catalyst for deliberative exchange; and 5) remind leaders of their trust-building roles and responsibilities.
In conclusion, *Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup and NSBA* results showed there was not strong confidence in the impact school boards and parents have on public education, nor was there strong sentiment on the part of school boards to make parental involvement a priority. Yet, each survey included information that acknowledged the role both school boards and parents/community play in public education. Not clear was how these two groups can work together to create policies through democratic practices. The Iowa study, as well as the two case studies of deliberative practices between school boards and communities, gets closer to addressing the relationship that can occur between school boards and the parents who want to have influence on local decisions. Again, this relationship is important because public schools implement policies approved by local school boards, and parents who have access to influencing district-level policies can impact the resulting practices that occur at their local schools.

Thus, the following research will explore how a school board frames deliberative democratic processes and which participatory stances parents assume during public meetings. In light of the research, I examine a school board’s meeting procedures and how they do or do not facilitate deliberation. Also, I seek to understand the roles parents assume as the school board engages them in decision-making processes. Finally, I explore the outcomes of the decision-making processes between the school board and parents, with a focus on how the tenets of deliberative democracy are or are not enacted. The next section will describe the methodology for this study.
Chapter Three

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to explore how a seven-member elected public school board engaged parents in decision-making processes. I examine how deliberative democratic processes frame participatory stances parents assumed during public meetings when policies were being discussed. While the literature showed an absence of studies that directly link school board policymaking with parent involvement, it also revealed a long history of parent involvement with school boards struggling between local control and federal or state mandates. Based on the literature, I assume that elected school boards should enact deliberative democratic practices to give parents access to systemic decisions that impact their children’s schools. While some of the literature suggested democratic forums may be problematic, my assumption stems from those theorists who believe access to deliberative processes can strengthen democracy. This access is essential for parents to maintain a locus of control with education policymaking at a local level.

The following research question and subquestions then guided the study:

In a public school district in which policies are directed increasingly by state and federal bodies, how does an elected school board engage its students’ parents in the District’s local decision-making processes?

1) What are the parameters and practices an elected school board establishes for parental participation in decision-making processes?

2) What participatory stances do parents take as they participate in decision-making processes?
3) How do decision-making processes enacted between the school board and parents demonstrate tenets of deliberative democracy?

This chapter outlines elements of this study’s research methodology. Specifically, I address the following: design rationale, methodology and strategy rationale, research sample, research design, data analysis and synthesis, ethical considerations, trustworthiness, limitations, and significance.

**Rationale for Qualitative Research Design**

I employed qualitative research designs to study one school board and its parents’ perceptions regarding policies and practices that occurred in the school board’s public policy-making processes. As noted earlier in the literature review and confirmed by education policy expert Frederick Hess (personal communication, July 12, 2011), there is a dearth of research regarding how parents participate in school board policy formulation processes. While the Lighthouse Inquiry mentioned earlier noted the importance of deliberation (Delagardelle, 2008), it lacks strong findings regarding involving parents in that process. Because the current study had scant information or available prior knowledge, it required research that involved broad exploratory and descriptive methods which made connections across a variety of data (Creswell, 2009; Shavelson & Towne, 2002). Parents and school board members described and qualified their policy-making experiences through surveys and interviews, and I collected additional data by observing public meetings and reviewing documents that chronicled those meetings.

I examined patterns in the descriptive, observational, and document data I collected. The perspectives of the research participants in the defined social setting yielded convergent and divergent views characteristic of exploratory and discovery
approaches in qualitative research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). This qualitative inquiry revealed a school board’s deliberative democratic processes and the parents’ participatory stances during public meetings when policies were being discussed. As I triangulated data from the processes, participants’ perspectives, and their apparent stances, I employed processes and mechanisms associated with qualitative inquiry (Maxwell, 2005).

Given the democratic processes that an elected body can practice to engage the public, I believe parents would expect to participate in such processes with their school board. How that participation looks and feels may be interpreted in different ways by different parents and board members. It is then the job of a qualitative researcher to understand how those being studied understand their world, as well as assign meaning to and make sense of their experiences (Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2005).

In my role as a qualitative researcher, it was important to assign meaning within the context of the research tools I used and how I coded and analyzed the data I gathered. I avoided reimagining or reassigning meaning based on what I hoped the data would say or on the beliefs I held. Yet, I recognized in advance my preconceived notions about how my school board traditionally engaged parents. For instance, in my experiences at board meetings, I saw parents speaking and board members passively listening. The lack of interplay may have suggested the board’s disinterest in the topic or the irrelevance of testimony if decisions had already been made behind closed doors. This study tested such assumptions as I sought confirming or disconfirming evidence of deliberative democratic practices during policy-making processes. Because this research is tied to a particular organization, Brooke District Public Schools, and an organizational process,
policymaking at public meetings, it is a bounded case study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008), the methodology of which will be discussed in the next section.

**Rationale for Case Study Methodology**

This study employed a case study methodology within the framework of the qualitative research design. Case studies are inquiries into real-life phenomena that have multiple variables of interest, rely on multiple sources of data requiring triangulation, benefit from theoretical propositions for data collection and analysis, and are bounded by time (Creswell, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2009). I studied Brooke Classical Charter School parents who gave input to school board policy and eventually requested waivers to the policy. I also studied parents who assisted the school board in researching high school block schedule models. I observed the real-life interactions and contexts between the board members and parents during public meetings that spanned 10 months. The surveys and interviews provided further insight into individual perceptions, values, and beliefs. The archival documents over the period of one year provided depth beyond the limited number of observations and interviews I could conduct. Therefore, case study methodology is appropriate because I am able to focus on individuals while illuminating larger issues for school board policymaking.

Even though I formed my own proposition about deliberative democratic practices that school boards could use, I remained open to all possibilities and systematically derived a theory about deliberative democratic processes reflected in the views of the parents and board members. By focusing on how the participants constructed views about the way they participated in democratic processes, as illustrated in my concept map (see Appendix A), I employed a grounded theory methodology.
characteristic of qualitative inquiry (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Creswell, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The grounded approach assisted in the development of my epistemological methodology described in the section that follows.

**Rationale for Grounded Theory Strategy**

As the literature revealed, parents want a share in school board power because, like all citizens, they hold a democratic wish for direct participation in politics (Berkman & Plutzer, 2005). Within this theory, my qualitative inquiry explored how parents fulfilled their democratic wish through participation in school board policy-making. By creating an abstract theory or process demonstrated in a conceptual framework, examining the data that emerges, and looking for categories that confirm or disprove the framework, a researcher employs a grounded theory strategy (Creswell, 2009).

The conceptual frameworks for grounded theory are built through inductive analysis whereby data is systematically collected, sorted, and coded (Charmaz, 2006). In this study, data related to democratic processes was gathered. Corbin and Strauss (2008), in their discussion of grounded theory, remind us that assumptions we have about the significance of process and complexity of phenomena are catalysts behind a researcher’s mission to study routine and problematic events or situations (p. 6). While the logistical operations of a school board can be routine, this study exemplified how decision-making processes involving parents can be problematized.

**Research Sample**

**Demographics and site description.**

Brooke District Public Schools (BDPS) is a large suburban school district located in the Mid-Atlantic region. Demographic information, as reported on the school district’s
website, was retrieved in October 2012. There were approximately 40,000 students attending 65 schools that ranged from pre-kindergarten through grade 12. Of the 5,500 employees, about 3,000 were teachers and administrators, with the remainder being support staff. The student demographics were as follows: 68% White, 11% Black or African American, 11% Hispanic of any race, 5% Asian, 5% two or more races, and <1% Alaskan Native, American Indian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. There were 11% of the students who received special education services. Twenty three percent of students were eligible to receive free or reduced-price meals. The school system’s 5.05% dropout rate was the lowest in the state, while the 91.5% on-time graduation rate was third in the state. The overall operating budget for fiscal year 2013 was approximately $500,000,000. BDPS invested an average of $12,154 per pupil.

I studied BDPS parents and the elected school board as they interacted during formal public meetings which were held in the evenings twice each month or during specially arranged sessions as needs dictated. The school board was comprised of seven members, two men and five females, all White, ranging in age from early forties to late sixties. All members were elected, with three members who will finish their terms in November 2013. At the time of the study, three had served on the board for one year, one had served for five years, and the remaining three members had held office for eight or more years. There was a board president and vice president, with a superintendent who served as the secretary, although the executive assistant to the school board actually recorded the minutes.

The window for this study spanned meetings that occurred during approximately ten months from September 2011 through June 2012. Rist (2003) acknowledges that
conducting qualitative research on policy formation during certain windows of opportunity can be difficult, and while his statement refers to the national level, I noticed this difficulty transferred to the local level. For example, in a pilot study I conducted in the spring of 2011 regarding a community group’s influence on a particular policy, the school board delayed its decision for nearly four months, and then asked staff to take another three months for follow up before they would approve the final policy. This resulted in significant changes to my research timeline. Therefore, based on my experience, my study focused on those parents and school board members who participated in public meetings from September 1, 2011 through June 30, 2012. This timeline provided parents with multiple opportunities for public deliberation and testimony to occur twice per month, and because decision-making processes were being studied as opposed to the decisions themselves, I was able to mitigate the time factors that potentially served as barriers.

I attended 17 public school board meetings, culled through nearly 220 pages of archival documents, and reviewed approximately seven hours of video footage from school board meetings. All meeting agendas and associated presentations and documents were posted electronically on the school system’s website several days prior to the meeting so the public would be aware of upcoming items. The board followed parliamentary procedures with Robert’s Rules of Order. Each meeting had 30 minutes designated in the agenda for public comment, although the board president could extend that period at his or her discretion. Parents who represented themselves individually were allotted three minutes to speak, while those representing groups could take five minutes to present their views. Parents spoke by approaching a microphone stand placed in front
of the board’s dais. Additionally, parents who presented information to the board during policy-making conversations were scheduled on the regular agenda and were not limited in time. Finally, all meetings were televised live, video and audio recorded, and posted on the school system’s website within two weeks of the meeting.

**Participant sample.**

This qualitative inquiry involved all seven board members and a relatively small segment of the entire BDPS parent population. I administered an online survey to all board members using Qualtrics software. Also, I interviewed four of them, one-on-one. The two cases, with parents from Brooke Classical Charter School and high school block schedule issues, represented a small percentage of potential parent participants. There were approximately 24,000 households for the nearly 41,000 students (school district data analyst, personal communication, December 28, 2011), and based on my experience attending school board meetings, there are fewer than 2% of the households represented at public board meetings in the span of one year. In the cases, eight parents participated in a focus group about the high school block schedule format. Six parents were part of a focus group that represented a charter school and petitioned the board for policy waivers.

Despite these cases lacking broad representation of the overall parent population, the two samples were purposefully chosen because both groups had direct deliberations with the school board. Social processes occurred at specific times in designated settings with defined individuals, all of which assisted me in answering my research questions (Maxwell, 2005; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The demographics of the focus groups were based on the self-selection of the parent leaders who identified potential participants. The charter school leader involved parents on the founding charter’s board or those who had
participated at school board meetings. For the block schedule focus group, parents who had helped construct the schedule survey or had spoken at previous board meetings were recommended by PTA leaders.

I conducted focus group interviews with parents who had participated in the policy discussions related to block schedule and charter school policies. Because school board members and parents who communicate with them had most likely accessed the pertinent information, they were more credible as participants and could speak to what they knew and how they knew it. The value of type of participant credibility is affirmed by Rubin and Rubin (2005). Because participants had multiple perspectives, I used different methods to gather information in order to add breadth and depth to my data set. By triangulating the perspectives of the two cases and the board, I strengthened the credibility of the data analysis. This overall research design will be discussed in the next section.

**Research Design**

I considered a number of factors in designing this study, including my focus on qualitative research and my role as participant observer. Keeping in mind requirements such as the importance of confidentiality, I developed specialized survey tools and interview protocols. Reviewing archival documents prior to analyzing and triangulating data were important final steps.

**Data collection.**

I used five methods for gathering data, several of which Marshall and Rossman (2011) indicate are common approaches in qualitative research. Each method addressed one or more of this study’s research questions as seen in Figure 1.
First, I participated in the setting as my job responsibilities required me to serve as consultant on policy discussions with the school board. Second, by attending meetings and reviewing corresponding video logs, I observed public school board meetings that involved the parents in these two cases. Third, I administered surveys to board members. Fourth, I conducted individual interviews with select school board members who agreed to participate. I also conducted two focus groups with self-selected representative parents from each case. I hired a service to transcribe all comments, and I coded the comments using ATLAS.ti 7 software. Fifth, I analyzed various documents that included board meeting minutes, presentations to the board, back up materials for board meetings, and local newspaper articles. My research journal assisted me in logging and reflecting on each phase of the data collection. Finally, a matrix that aligned research questions and their rationale with explicit instrument items assisted me in organizing the data I collected (see Appendix B).

**Participant observer with fieldnotes.**

As a researcher who was a participant observer, I had to balance both roles. During the data collection window, I presented at public meetings where the block schedule agenda items were discussed. Board members held their views, parents
expressed theirs, and I represented staff interests. There was value to being on the inside (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) because I had a deeper knowledge of the topics at hand and I had firsthand access to the participant sample and processes. Through participation and observation, I witnessed personal dynamics, experienced the environment, was part of a process, and interpreted the events, all of which would not have been possible through a survey or other instrument.

Given my position of authority inside the school system, I was cognizant that those who participated with me may have assumed that my purpose as a researcher was somehow evaluative (Erickson, 1986). Board members may have wondered if I was judging their capacity to involve parents in decision making, and parents may have thought I represented the board’s views. Conversely, if I had removed myself as a participant during public meetings, I would have been relegated exclusively to the observer role, which would have been a “marginalizing activity, marking the writer as an observer rather than as a full, ordinary participant” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 37). Since I was inextricably linked to school board processes when I was in the room as a participant or observer researcher, I constantly monitored the dual nature of my presence.

Regardless of whether I was acting as a participant or observer, the data collection methods were similar. Sitting at the presentation table or participating in board deliberation, I took jottings by hand and converted them within a week to formal fieldnotes. The conversion to fieldnotes within a matter of days captured the most immediate reflections I had. This participatory method was less obtrusive than using a laptop or tape recorder because it allowed for more discretion as I was on television and
engaged in conversations while at a microphone. During public meetings when I was an observer, not a participant, I was seated in the audience with a laptop. Because I worked as a university transcriber as an undergraduate student, I found that my laptop entries with dialogue needed little conversion to be formal fieldnotes. As with the participatory method, I still added reflections in a timely manner. Additionally, putting my fieldnotes on the computer assisted me later as I performed analysis and coded them for themes.

Finally, there were times when I missed portions of meetings or was otherwise engaged; therefore, I learned what took place or added to my fieldnotes by reviewing the videos stored on the school system’s website. This fieldnote process was an important one as ‘analysis-in-description’ (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 106). My board of education observation protocol helped frame the process (see Appendix C). Each meeting in which I participated or observed resulted in description, inquiry and reflection. This demonstrated how I as a participant observer researcher understood the process as one that extended beyond merely participating in or recording events.

**Survey.**

I administered a confidential survey to all school board members. The purpose of the survey was to give me a way to categorize participation stances, practices, priorities, and beliefs related to school board policymaking and parental participation in the process. A survey was the preferred method of data collection for these items due to the economy of design that allowed me to delineate factors that were common within the realm of how a school board established policies. Surveys also provide anonymity, which is important when individuals reveal their own beliefs or their perceptions of others. Also, a survey allows a rapid turnaround time within a week.
While the survey instrument for this study was my original design, I adapted ideas from the National School Boards Association survey administered in 2010 (Hess & Weeks, 2010). I designed the survey using online software from Qualtrics so that survey respondents could maintain confidentiality. Each board member was notified in writing at the beginning of the survey that the research was associated with a university and was part of a study. Through a check-off, respondents gave permission for their information to be used as data and acknowledged understanding that I would hold it confidential. The survey had approximately 32 items and was projected to take no longer than 15 minutes to complete (see Appendix D).

My main purpose for administering the survey was to explore relationships and find associations (Anderson, Herr, & Sigrid Nihlen, 2007) among and between school board members and parents related to their understanding of democratic processes enacted and to find where the locus of control rests with policymaking. I included closed-end items on a 4-point scale because even-numbered scales can better discriminate between options and not give the responder a neutral option (Bradburn, Sudman, & Wansink, 2004). Three questions also contained free-response blocks to allow respondents the opportunity to provide a detailed or unique response. Prior to administering the survey, I piloted it with BCPS staff, a former school board member, and a current school board member from another state who was not part of the study. I made small adjustments to the instruments based on the feedback I received, which included clarifying wording and providing options for open responses.
**Interviews.**

Interviews with school board members and parents allowed me to probe their perceptions about how they delivered or received processes intended to engage parents in policymaking. I had hoped to elicit preconceived beliefs about processes and whether the experiences matched the beliefs. Parents and board members all had their own stories to tell, stories which could not be captured through observation or standardized surveys. Interviewees are conversational partners who want the researcher to know what is important to them (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Therefore, I started easily by probing their personal beliefs, progressed to more analytic questions where interviewees had to speculate about the other party (board member or parent), and ended by asking interviewees to offer personal advice to parents or board members who would engage in policymaking.

I developed interview protocols in advance (see Appendices E & F), paying particular attention to my follow-up questions so as to elicit nuances as recommended by Rubin and Rubin (2005). Nuance was important in this study as perception can take many forms. I interviewed four individual school board members and fourteen parents across two focus groups regarding their perception of how parents experienced school board governance, as directly related to my first and second research questions. I was not able to interview board members in a focus group format due to their legislative rules about quorum. All interviews were conducted face-to-face. The board member interviews lasted approximately one hour and the focus groups last approximately ninety minutes.
I used predominantly loose-questions that were general enough to allow participants an opportunity to define terms, although I also used converging questions that narrowed in on what the participant was actually feeling (Thomas, 2003). I was an active listener so I would not miss information, make assumptions about meaning, or draw broad conclusions based on cursory responses. I hired a service to transcribe all individual and focus group interviews. I coded all transcripts which were subsequently included with data from my participant/observer fieldnotes and the surveys. As with the survey, interview questions were piloted with parents and non-system school board members. Adjustments were made to phrases and to the question order for better clarity and flow.

**Document Review.**

I collected several types of documents for this study: school board agendas and minutes, notes from public meetings, newspaper articles, and existing policies that may outline how parents can participate in decision-making processes of the school board. Most of the documents were archival, chronicling public and official events (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). With the exception of newspaper articles retrieved online, all documents were available on the school district’s website. To consolidate data and avoid overload, I created a document summary form as recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994), making sure to stay focused on my research questions. I was careful about drawing a direct inference about participatory stances until I considered perceptions shared in interviews and surveys.
Sequencing and triangulation of data collected.

Linear sequencing was most prevalent with the interviews and survey. I waited until both the charter school and block scheduling cases came to conclusion prior to conducting interviews with the parent focus groups. Also, I waited to conduct individual interviews with board members until the survey I administered to them was complete. I felt this sequencing was best so parents and board members could experience the full range of the decision-making processes and outcomes for both cases. Also, I did not want board member survey responses swayed by personal interview experiences, which is why I first administered the survey. In addition to linear sequencing, parallel sequencing occurred as I participated in and observed board meetings, reviewed documents, and logged journal entries. All of these activities occurred over a period of 10 months.

To increase the validity and reliability of the study, I used multiple methods of data collection with multiple sources as presented thus far in the research design. The triangulation of participants in this study followed a constructivism model that recognized different people can have their own realities in their minds (Golafshani, 2003) and, as Stake’s (2003) research shows, that “multiple perceptions clarify meaning” (Triangulation section, para. 2). For instance, the parents and board members expressed both convergent and divergent beliefs about the types of interactions they had and the respective roles they held. I found that the bulk of participants confirmed the most frequent stances cited in the literature and illustrated in the concept map (see Appendix A), but I also found evidence that challenged widely held beliefs. The same can be said for the board members who brought alternate perspectives of creating and managing the
conditions for democratic processes. Some believed they were open to deliberation because they give parents a forum to speak, but some parents thought forums were perfunctory and did not result in decisions reflective of deliberative democracy. Thus, the multiple methods I used and the multiple sources of evidence I collected led to converging lines of inquiry that assisted me with data analysis and synthesis (Yin, 2009).

**Methods for Data Analysis and Synthesis**

The challenge for this study was tracking the varied amounts of data I collected during the course of several months. The tracking required careful monitoring, so I had to develop a plan that first organized data by quantity and type and then reduced the data so I could organize it into identifiable patterns. To help with these challenges, I developed a matrix that connected research questions and data instrument items (see Appendix B). Also, Maxwell (2005) suggests analytic tools such as categorization strategies (coding, thematic analysis), memos, and connection strategies such as narrative analysis. These tools were integral parts of my data analysis plan.

I relied on coding and thematic analysis as the primary approaches in addressing two key components of my conceptual framework: 1) deliberative democratic parameters and practices that the school board uses during public meetings and 2) participatory stances parents may assume during school board meetings. I constructed deductive codes that aligned with theories already put forward in the literature review. However, I did not want to be limited to preconstructed lists, so I allowed space for inductive coding to emerge in addition to my grounded theory approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

I developed a Code Progression List on Excel worksheets, where I logged three phases of coding. During the first phase I used a “bucket” approach which deductively
assigned topics as generally explored in my research questions. I conducted a quick read of my two focus group transcripts, each of which were 43 pages in length, and jotted notes that I thought would be helpful for an inductive or grounded theory approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For example, I noted short phrases that appeared to speak to process. From there, I grouped similar concepts and derived “sub buckets” that would further delineate concepts related to process. This phase helped familiarize me with my data and acquainted me with general trends or poignant remarks.

As I moved to phase two and reread the focus group transcripts, I found two more large buckets or “families” that emerged. Additionally, the sub buckets took greater shape as codes that could be defined and applied. At times, I reached back into my literature to derive definitions. Because the subsequent findings and analysis represent an iterative process that interfaces with the literature, I felt using some of these definitions in the coding stage would assist me later as I discussed confirmatory and contradictory findings that reflected my conceptual framework. With the families and codes named and defined, I then created abbreviations to facilitate the coding process. Of note during this phase was an acute awareness that I was bringing my knowledge of the processes, outcomes, and politics into the coding. At times, I had to stop and recode because I was trying to use the data to make sense of what I believed – as opposed to making sense of the data. Again, it was here that I found the definitions helpful in bringing me back to purposeful and strategic coding.

I put my work aside for a couple weeks and found the break to be beneficial for the third pass I made at coding focus group data. Also, at this point, I had all school board interviews complete. By coding the data three times, I was able to check myself
for consistency and identify areas I may have previously missed. For instance, at one point I created a family grouping called “listening”. I did not create sub codes within it because I was making a single pass with the new concept and applying it to my data sets. This third phase also gave me pause so I could sort out the decision making family. At first, I found myself wanting to list the specific policy areas where parents would or would not be able to influence the school board, but I held off with sub codes until I received the board interview transcripts. I created codes that broadly sorted arenas by influence instead of coding each arena separately. Once my coding was complete, I used ATLAS.ti 7 software to filter the coded transcripts.

While I did not perform statistical analysis with my data sets, the numeric counts on filtered codes helped me initially eyeball where the data was concentrated. For example, I was a bit surprised the charter school focus group had nearly 25% more “hits” that aligned with family codes; however, when I went back and looked at how I coded the transcripts, the block schedule focus group did not elaborate as much on responses. This led me to believe I had lengthier concentrated passages from charter school parents. While these musings were not significant, they were part of my learning process with the data software.

Coding assisted with theme identification, but analytic memos served as a tool I used for data interpretation. Memo writing is a transformative process that allows a researcher to simultaneously synthesize patterns or themes and conceptualize their meaning (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Throughout the participation and observation process during school board meetings, I took fieldnotes, but the memos logged iterative thoughts that started with I wonder and resulted in I conclude. At times, my memos
logged in my research journal were informal with short questions and suppositions, and at other times, the memos were formalized with well-developed interpretations grounded in literature and theory.

The thickest data descriptions, analysis, and synthesis occurred with narrative connections. The school board members and parents told stories about their experiences with public meetings and deliberative democratic practices. I examined each word, phrase, and line in the interviews and asked myself what the interviewees really believed or felt, an essential component of a grounded theory approach (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). I then constructed codes that clustered themes showing relationships across the cases. As Boyatzis (1998) asserts, “Empirical approaches to creating clusters help by revealing the relationships of the themes as they appear in the data...” (p. 141). From those codes, I wove a composite narrative that connected the research sample’s experiences to theory and practice. In essence, this was a data reduction process that helped me break my data down into manageable chunks. Also, I was able to interpret the data and bring meaning to the experiences that occurred between the school board and parents. Because I used people’s own words or observable actions, I needed to be sensitive to ethical concerns (Boyatzis, 1998), to which I now turn.

**Ethical Considerations**

As a chief operating officer, I have direct and ongoing relationships with my school board members and parents in the district. To help me mitigate some of the potential conflict that may occur with my positionality, I focused on a few key concepts from Zeni’s (2001) guide to ethical decision making for insider research. First, as noted on my surveys and interviews, I required informed consent from board members and
parents (see Appendix G). Second, power relationships came to the forefront of my study. School board members have direct influence on my immediate supervisor, so any dissatisfaction they potentially have with this study’s process or outcome could negatively impact my supervisor or me. Parents may also see me in a position of power because I may present at a meeting a staff position that is contrary to the viewpoint parents are taking at the meeting, and if the policy decision favors staff, parents may feel their input is meaningless. Third, I have considered implications for publication. Since the school board is a discreet and identifiable group, I have used a pseudonym for the district name to ensure subject confidentiality. I would not want the publicized research results to have an unintended consequence that impacts their future work with the parent community. Yet, as a researcher, I believe the results of this study can benefit my district and even other districts with elected school boards that interface with parents. For this to happen, the research must be trustworthy.

**Trustworthiness**

Qualitative researchers tend to rely more on the trustworthiness of their work than on traditional validity measures found with quantitative researchers (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Trustworthiness can be accomplished through strategies such as credibility and transferability. I worked to establish credibility through logical alignment of my research methods and questions as previously discussed, and I triangulated multiple data sources (school board members and parents) and data collection methods (participation, observations, surveys, interviews, documents). Also, I performed member checks and relied on the professional knowledge I had garnered during my long experience with the school district. I believe this study may result in
transferability because the findings could be useful to others in similar situations. Specifically, my rich descriptions of deliberative purpose, process, practice, and stances would allow other researchers to determine transferability. The context of this study, elected school boards establishing policies and creating public meeting spaces for parents and community members, is replicated throughout thousands of school districts in the United States. While the actual practices and beliefs of the subjects in this study cannot be generalized to all districts, the findings of policy-making processes that include deliberative democracy could be transferable.

Limitations

This study contains certain limitations characteristic of qualitative studies such as subjectivity, reactivity, and restrictivity (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). First, my subjectivity as a researcher may have posed threats. I periodically checked my biases about individual board members and parents to prevent them from clouding my data collection or analysis. In my research journal, I articulated those biases as a reminder to be conscious of them in subsequent personal interactions and research strategies. Also, performing member checks with advisors and peers assisted me with coding and analysis. Second, I needed to realize that as a researcher inside my own organization, I could be reactive or presumptive, so I asked myself why at every turn. Why is the board asking parents to be involved in decisions? Why are parents engaging with the board? Why did I believe deliberative democracy is an essential practice for a school board to use, and how did this influence the conclusions I drew? Third, this study was restricted to ten months in one setting. I recognized that topics that came before the school board were
cyclical. Also, the opportunity for board policymaking can vary as can the degree and manner to which parents participate in processes. Therefore, I had to understand this study’s limitations before discussing implications for further study.

**Significance: Post-dissertation Communication**

The purpose of this study is to inform school boards, policymakers, parents, and other educational leaders on the possibilities elected school boards may engage parents in decision-making processes at the district level. Since the study is taking place in Brooke District Public Schools, the results will have the most relevance in the district’s setting.

Upon the successful defense of my dissertation and conferment of a doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania, I plan to share the research findings with my school board and parent community. I intend to do this at a public meeting during the summer of 2013. It is my hope that this study will assist the the board of Brooke District Public Schools and others in realizing how they can create deliberative spaces and effective procedures for parents to engage in policymaking. The school board may even work with parents to develop consistent practices and clear procedures so that parents can be more authentically engaged through deliberative democratic models at board meetings.
Chapter Four

Findings: School Board and Parent Narratives

This chapter and the next reflect the findings of my data analyses as described in the Methodology chapter. First, I contextualize the setting by giving a history of the Brooke District Public Schools (BDPS) Board of Education. I briefly describe the elected composition of the board and their decision-making rationale and processes preceding the two cases at hand. I also detail the parents I included in the study and describe why I chose them. Next, I present narratives that tell the story of the BDPS Board of Education, the Brooke Classical Charter School parents, and the high school block schedule parents. These reveal how the school board and each parent group approached the decision making that occurred relative to the interests they presented. I intentionally privilege the school board narrative because the questions guiding this research are primarily exploring dynamics in relation to the board. In the next chapter, I conclude with three themes that emerge from my data analyses: rules of engagement for deliberative democracy, roles enacted during deliberative democracy, and action following deliberative forums. As I present each theme, I discuss the data within individual cases to exemplify participant experiences unique to the case at hand. I also synthesize data across cases to reveal convergent and divergent occurrences.

Parent Engagement Narratives

Local Context: establishing a forum.

Seven individuals, all of whom were elected to office, served on the BDPS school board from September 2011 through June 2012. Terms last four years, with board members selecting their own officers. The board members’ tenures varied in length. Ms.
Jones, the most senior member of the board, was appointed by the governor in 1994 prior to the county shifting in 2000 to publicly elected school board officials. Ms. Lang and Ms. Polly were elected to two consecutive terms starting in 2004. Ms. Hook was elected in 2008 and served as president during this study’s timeline. Mr. Elder, Mr. Kindle, and Dr. Reever were the newest members sworn in to their four-year terms starting December 2010. For the purpose of interview citations throughout the narratives, it should be noted that Ms. Hook, Ms. Lang and Mr. Elder were individually interviewed on August 9, 2012, and Ms. Jones was interviewed on August 13, 2012. The other three board members were not interviewed.

Mr. Elder, Mr. Kindle, and Dr. Reever ran in November 2010 as a slate on a combined platform, with an existing board member, Ms. Polly, endorsing their candidacy. All three campaigned as fiscal conservatives and emphasized how the school system needed to be transparent with and accountable to all decisions. Furthermore, they campaigned promising a customer-service stance. All three members saw parents as consumers who should share in school board decision-making processes, and they emphasized the importance of parents bringing different opinions forward for deliberation.

During the campaign process, the slate gave their word to represent those who put them in office. Dr. Reever’s campaign focused on removing a contested math curriculum; she also wanted parents to have alternatives to traditional public schools, so she endorsed charter school parent interests. Mr. Elder and Mr. Kindle similarly expressed their allegiance to support charter school applicants. Working together at its first meeting, the coalition demonstrated their intent to keep their campaign promises.
They pledged four action items, one of which was bring back to vote the recent denial of the Brooke Classical Charter School (BCCS) application.

The board, with its newly installed slate, held a public meeting on December 8, 2010. The evening meeting had all seven board members present and seated at a raised dais in front of a room that could hold 100 audience members. About 30 staff and community members were present. This meeting, as all school board meetings, was broadcast live on a local cable channel and streamed on the internet.

The president, Mr. Elder, placed the slate’s four items on the agenda. Breaking from past board practice, these action items had not been posted to the public one week prior to the meeting, and a vote was taken without public input. Ms. Polly aligned herself with the newly elected members, and with a 4-3 majority vote, all motions passed. The three remaining incumbents (Ms. Hook, Ms. Lang, and Ms. Jones) admonished Mr. Elder’s coalition about not respecting the public; they voted against each motion, feeling each was scripted in advance. When criticized by parents, Mr. Elder indicated that enough input from the public had been received during the campaign process to allow the board to make its decisions. He believed his coalition was keeping a campaign promise. The BCCS parents had viewed the coalition as being friendly to charter schools, and with the vote, the board created an opportunity for them to renew their application.

In essence, the board was requesting BCCS parents return to the table so they could present an argument to earn the new board’s approval to grant a charter. Because the board was initiating a deliberative forum, I selected BCCS for a case study on how an elected school board engages parents in decision-making processes, using deliberative democracy as a framework. Brooke Classical Charter School, Inc. is a 501(c) (3)
nonprofit organization that held the charter for BCCS. On its website, the parent organization said, “After several years of hurdles, in April 2012 the Board of Education approved our school to open in August 2013. The exhausting years of effort...inspired our motto- *Nil Sine Magno Labore*—nothing without great labor” (About- XXX Charter School, 2012). BCCS’ site further described the importance of self-government and how democracy requires persuading others.

The parents I included in this case were those who deliberated on behalf of BCCS or otherwise spoke about BCCS during public comment at board meetings. Specifically, I conducted a focus group on July 1, 2012 with six BCCS parents, four of whom were Brooke Classical Charter School, Inc. officers. The president, Mr. Allen, recommended focus group members at my request. He and the acting treasurer, Ms. Mellin, most often represented BCCS during deliberations at public school board meetings. From the public comment data I gathered while attending board meetings and reviewing archival video, 13 speakers presented testimony on BCCS. Ten were BCCS parents, two were district Parent Teacher Association leaders who opposed BCCS, and one was the president of the state’s charter school network. The duration of BCCS deliberations with the board extended from October 2011 through June 2012.

Just as the school board initiated a deliberative process with BCCS parents, it reached out to a different set of parents on another topic, the high school block schedule format. The BCCS parents appeared before the school board on numerous occasions, whereas the parents leading the conversation about the block schedule formally presented only once to the board. I now turn to the high school block schedule case.
In January 2011, Ms. Hook, Dr. Reever, and Ms. Lang requested the school board hold a discussion regarding the use of high school block scheduling. At the time, as the associate superintendent for secondary schools, I spent the next couple months researching the history of various high school schedule models used by BDPS, gathering schedule data from other school districts in the state, and researching literature on schedule formats. The board subsequently placed the topic on its September 26, 2011 meeting agenda. Following my presentation, Dr. Reever said, “I’d like community feedback if we can. If we get a rash or flood of people coming in saying ‘don’t change our block schedule,’ that would be helpful.” Ms. Jones concurred that parental input would show the board what to do.

The Parent Teacher Association (PTA) Council of Brooke District took the lead on gathering data to present the parents’ position to the school board. The president, Ms. Payne, and second vice president, Ms. Dent conducted a parent forum in November 2011. They also designed and administered an online survey to BDPS high school parents in December 2011. In my findings, I incorporated data from the 64 parents who attended the open forum and considered data from 2,246 survey respondents as summarized by PTA leaders. I also conducted a focus group on June 29, 2012 with eight parents who wished to discuss the block schedule decision-making process with me. Ms. Dent, at my request, recommended members for the focus group. The deliberations around the high school block schedule topic began with my presentation in September 2011 and ended with Ms. Dent and Ms. Payne’s presentation of findings in March 2012. During this time, no parents appeared at board meetings to offer public comment.
Brooke District Public Schools Board of Education.

The Board of Education (BOE) for Brooke District Public Schools (BDPS) communicated its desire to involve parents and local citizens in its decision-making processes. On the school system’s website, the BOE said it welcomed citizens to attend public sessions. Additionally, the BOE created a Handbook for Citizen Involvement (Schoolwires, Inc., 2012) that outlined school board processes for the public’s understanding. Included in the handbook was a section entitled Public Involvement- Who Sets the Standards? It stated the BOE would set the standards for public education, but the citizens would set the standards for the board, “Since the citizens elect the BOE, ultimately the standards are set by the citizens” (p.22). The document conceded there would be competing priorities, but it would the board’s job to make informed decisions based on what they hear from the public.

Given the published commitment to involve the public in board decisions, I turned to the results of the survey that I had previously administered to the school board to see if the same sentiment was expressed. The five board members who responded to the survey felt parent engagement in decision making was somewhat or moderately urgent for them. Of the five, four board members believed that parents should be asked for opinions throughout a process, whereas one member felt parents should be full partners in a process, but not be permitted a vote on policy. All five respondents indicated it was moderately or extremely important to listen to opposing views, allow deliberation with parents, encourage diverse views to come forward, and question the ways things have always been done.
The four board members who participated in the individual interviews talked about the need to engage parents in a decision-making process. They also knew that doing so would not be an easy task. Ms. Lang speculated, “I think we do need to engage parents, even if it means we are 70/30 and we do 70 percent of the trying.” This comment suggests the onus of involving parents in decisions rests with the board. But parents may not always feel as if the board cares to involve parents. This is an image Mr. Elder wanted to change, “I would hope I could change the image so that the average parent ... understood that if there was an issue that they can engage the board and the board does care.” Both Ms. Lang and Mr. Elder used the word “engage,” and explained it is an act that can be initiated by the board or parents. Being engaged, though, does not always equate with decision making. Ms. Jones pointed out, “I think parents can let us know what they’re thinking, what the community’s thinking, but they can’t be the last word.” The board members conveyed their belief in parent engagement, but also suggested the BOE needed to be the final decision makers following an engagement process.

Via the survey and interviews, I asked board members about the processes they use to engage parents. The BOE survey revealed that four of the five respondents agreed with the statement that there are clear policies that direct parents on how to participate in the local board’s decision making. Ms. Hook indicated there is a three-minute time limit for individuals who speak at public comment, along with a stated rule that personnel matters could not be discussed. Ms. Jones echoed Ms. Hook’s understanding of the personnel rule and the time limit but stated, “We’ve hardly ever kept to that time.” She believed most boards gave parents the courtesy of finishing their comments as long as
many people were not waiting in line. Ms. Lang confirmed the formal rules regarding
time and personnel matters. Mr. Elder indicated he did not think there were really any
formal rules of which parents were aware. Despite chairing dozens of meetings where he
read the written protocol about personnel comments and time limits, he said of parents’
understanding of rules, “I don’t know that they know any. To me, as long as they’re
respectful, they can say whatever they want to say.”

Ms. Lang believed strongly in how the board president should use Robert’s Rules
of Order to maintain a sense of formality at meetings, even though Mr. Elder felt the
president’s job was simpler, to make sure parents, “stay within boundaries of not saying
things that are inappropriate.” Ms. Lang estimated 99% of parents who spoke to the
board “obeyed” recommendations for how to speak. She believed there was no place for
“private comments to board members that would be maybe less than respectful.” Yet,
Ms. Hook commented on the reality, “It would be nice to think that somebody would
come up and speak respectfully, but we’ve had parents get up and they were very upset.
We have not stopped them.” To her, the board needs to maintain flexibility so that
parents’ emotions could be expressed, despite the formal nature of the protocols.

Ms. Lang commented on the formalities implemented at board meetings, first
noting the agenda, “[We] have a formal responsibility and I think we have an agenda that
we have to get through. There’s a reason for that agenda. Every item on there is there
strategically.” As she reflected on the formality of BOE meetings, Ms. Lang wished they
could forget Robert’s Rules of Order and be less formal. “Just come and sit and have a
little chit-chat with the board members.” However, the board had made a decision to
broadcast all meetings as a sign of transparency for the public. In her view, Ms. Lang
thought televising meetings compromised informality. She believed free and open conversations would be more difficult to manage with microphones and cameras present.

Ms. Hook concurred with Ms. Lang about the meeting setting. “It’s still in that very formal setting where the board sits in front and people come to a microphone and speak.” She suggested a more relaxed environment be made available to parents, but she doubted many parents would come unless the forums were held in the communities where the parents’ children went to school. When I asked Ms. Hook what such a meeting would look like, she responded, “I would like us just to all be sitting down and no planned agenda and the community can ask us questions or share great ideas they may have. That’s what I mean by informal.” The idea of abandoning a formal agenda for an open discussion was an ideal sought by Ms. Lang and Ms. Hook, but one that Ms. Jones and Mr. Elder had seen fail.

Ms. Jones recounted her past experience as a board member who held informal gatherings with no agenda to encourage parent engagement. “We’ve tried that before. We tried having coffees and teas and things. It didn’t work. They didn’t come, but it would be nice if we could have something like that that would be a two-way.” She thought parent groups with similar interests could have conversations with the board informally. At one point five years prior, the BOE had a live television show for parents who could call in and chat about commonly identified issues. Mr. Elder did not believe that alternative was successful for the BOE, “I didn’t feel it was an effective show because it was kind of more scripted; they were trying to get their agenda across as opposed to really getting, you know, public input.”
In addition to discussing rules and formalities, board members commented about decision-making processes in general. Mr. Elder believed a decision-making process started with him getting the support of other board members. He wanted parents to know that if they took the time to email him, call him, or appeal to him at a public meeting, their involvement in a policy decision would matter. Ms. Hook was more cautionary, saying systemic decisions could not be based on concerns of one or two parents:

We should look into it if we start to hear a concern, but you can’t make just an emotional decision. As a board, you have to make a responsible decision, an informed decision. So, you know, just because a parent speaks out, that doesn’t mean we’re going to agree with that parent. We definitely want to hear that parent’s input, but again it doesn’t mean that that’s what we’re going to agree is the best thing for the system as a whole.

Mr. Elder argued how there is still a human factor behind what is printed in black and white. “To me, policies are guidelines and parameters. Not absolutes. And, when we use policies to make our decisions, that means we don’t need people anymore.”

Furthermore, he said citing chapter and verse without engaging parents and considering how a policy could be changed means the board has “lost all leadership and control of what we’re doing, and I just want us to get out of that mentality.”

The interviews with the board members showed that they struggled with balancing the formality and informality of meetings. Their own meeting parameters and practices appeared to create the barriers for the open dialogue they desired. In addition to the tension they described, through their survey responses, board members identified other potential barriers to involving parents in decision making. Three out of five survey respondents felt state mandates were strong barriers to setting local policy. Four board members identified No Child Left Behind legislation as a moderate or strong barrier. In
light of outside influences that could inhibit local policymaking, board members saw parental expectations to be involved in board decisions as a minimal barrier, and resulting conversation with board members revealed their firm belief in parental involvement with district level decisions. Board policies related to budget, curriculum, and facilities emerged as the arenas most available for parental engagement.

Board members also had preconceived notions about roles parents could assume at public meetings. As the literature review shows, parents can assume a variety of stances when they present to a school board their positions for consideration. Some of those stances include advocacy, expert, and proxy agent roles. In the school board survey, the five responding board members were asked to rate the frequency (often, sometimes, rarely, never) that parents assumed various roles. Three board members thought parents often acted as an advocate for a particular issue, and two board members thought parents often acted as an advocate for a particular group. Four board members thought parents sometimes acted as an adviser to inform the board. Board members showed the most divergence around parents serving as advocates for individual child issues. One respondent thought that it happened often, two said sometimes, and two said rarely. The resulting interviews shared more insight into the parents’ stances as perceived by board members.

On the matter of individual child interests, Ms. Hook was most adamant about parental engagement being tied to parochial interests. She did not believe many parents cared to comment about policy issues, believing, “It’s more ‘this is happening to my child – please fix it,’ because parents are out there advocating for their children, and they want
what’s best for their children.” Ms. Hook felt parents needed to handle such disputes at the school level, not the district level.

Ms. Jones, a former school and county PTA president, saw PTA leaders working hard for the school system’s interests. She struggled with naming a stance, but eventually decided lobbying best described these parents’ roles when deliberating with the board. “They’re there to be lobbyists. I shouldn’t call them lobbyists, but they’re there to lobby and make a difference, and I think they have over the years.” Ms. Jones believed engaging parents could meet board goals to improve the school system.

Sometimes parents may assume stances as proxy agents. This happens when there are those who may not come forward, so other parents take up the torch. Ms. Lang saw this occur particularly in the special education realm. She saw these parents as those “who have passion and who have compassion and who are, maybe-themselves, personally affected by a policy issue, or maybe they speak for somebody else who may be not as comfortable.” Even Ms. Hook saw groups of parents willing to let others lead a charge, “We have a couple of very outspoken parents and I think others think there are those people that will take care of that.”

Finally, Mr. Elder saw some parents adopting an informational stance. He felt parents served to make the board aware of issues they are unhappy with. The board would then serve as a conduit that would connect district-level staff with the concern. His expectation was that the staff would report findings back to the board. Then, “if it’s something we need to change a policy with, or whatever it may be, that the public feels that they have some avenue by which to influence what happens in the school system.”

Even though parents may adopt an information-sharing stance, Mr. Elder showed his
understanding that the parental role extended beyond merely creating awareness. There was an expectation that involvement in a process would have systemic impact.

The interviews and survey revealed board members’ perceptions regarding their meeting parameters and practices. They also identified policy arenas where they thought parents had the most ability to influence district-level decisions. Finally, board members categorized various participatory stances they saw parents assume at public meetings. The case study narratives that follow demonstrate the parameters, practices, and stances in action.

Brooke Classical Charter School.

The narrative for the Brooke Classical Charter School starts with its appearance before the Brooke District Public Schools board of education on February 8, 2012. Various parents affiliated with BCCS spoke to the board during public comment in anticipation of the local charter school Policy 440 being brought forward for their input. This comprehensive policy includes the definition for charter schools, the application processes, student admission criteria, governance structures, fiscal and academic accountability, and appeal processes. Parents felt Policy 440 had room for improvement and they wanted to have a collaborative decision-making process with the board. Parents expressed how the board needed to deliberate publicly. They also wanted to have direct input in policy changes.

Several parents who supported BCCS were in attendance at the public meeting. They approached the microphone during the public comment segment that took place prior to the board’s policy discussion. Ms. Medeas first spoke about how the board misapplied state law in relation to buy-back services and deadline extensions. She
implored the board to follow its established procedures, saying, “This is an issue of public policy that should be discussed in public.” Likewise, Ms. Kendall cited the commitment of BCCS and said she wanted “an opportunity to sit at that table and have an open discussion to answer questions about our building.” She even reminded the board that its own member, Dr. Reever, had suggested an open round table discussion about the policy.

The board subsequently asked staff to bring forward Policy 440 at the February 22, 2012 board meeting. The board also asked three charter schools, including BCCS, to give feedback and participate in the conversation. During that February 22, 2012 meeting, six BCCS parents took action and spoke during public comment. Also, they invited the president of the state’s charter school network to speak about high performing charters in the state. Ms. Allen and Ms. Mellin cited language from the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NASCA), trying to convince the board that its own policy could have flexibility as suggested by NASCA. Mr. Anthony followed these speakers and asked the board to take risks, not follow a path, and leave a trail for others. He asked the board to forego its own red tape, saying, “It seems to be the bureaucracy needs to get out of its own way. This is why we want charter schools, so that we have less bureaucracy and not more.” Finally, Ms. Kendall submitted a petition with 215 signatures in support of the board altering Policy 440 to allow an eight-year lease term. She said the board had an opportunity to be a model for others to follow. BCCS parents clearly wanted the board to relax its policy and be a leader in the state with charter school authorization.
Following public comment, BDPS staff members Ms. Nichols, the school district’s attorney, and Dr. Sands, the charter school liaison for the district, presented to the board. Ms. Nichols explained BCCS and the other charter schools had been permitted to submit written comment, noting that she did not extensively review the documents because of the length. Additionally, she felt some of the comments, such as the role of the director in the school system’s governance structure, made for good conversation, but were irrelevant to the Policy 440 discussion. Dr. Reever showed unease and said she did not believe the local policy always accurately reflected the state’s model policy. Therefore, she invited the charter school leaders to the presentation table to share their perspectives, against the objections of the board president Ms. Hook who thought the forum was for staff. Ms. Nichols and Ms. Sands looked uncomfortable as they had to shift chairs and share space at the table with the charter school parents.

The BCCS representative, Mr. Allen, had direct conversation with several board members. He told Dr. Reever that his group had no position on changing the date for a concept proposal, yet he requested a handbook be created for charter applicants with updates being noted in the policy. Furthermore, he felt the application and charter should be separate processes; in response, board member Ms. Lang complimented him on “being articulate and explaining the potential conflicts.” When the conversation turned to employee negotiations, Mr. Allen requested that charter school boards have a space on the negotiating team and be permitted to see employee evaluations. The attorney said she could not support these changes in policy and categorized his suggestions as “a point for discussion.” Ms. Lang became flustered and quickly mumbled that she thought the whole purpose of the presentation was policy discussion.
Mr. Allen then implored the board to lobby at the state level to receive capital funds for facilities, particularly due to the difficulties he was having securing a lease for BCCS. Ms. Nichols interjected that the BDPS local policy was a model supported by the state. Mr. Allen retorted, “The ruling is narrow based on one school’s experience.” Mr. Elder tried to mediate, saying:

We could make ourselves more friendly, such as creating a FAQ handbook. The only way we can do that is reflecting through the process and asking what problems you encounter, what hiccups there are in the process, so the BOE can be more of a help to get from A to B without putting hurdles in place.

The board did not take any action on the policy because they wanted to consider the information that had been shared by staff and charter school representation. They politely thanked parents for being present for the discussion, and the parents thanked the board. Mr. Allen suggested an annual get-together be arranged for similar conversations.

**Waiver request to policy.**

The board then advanced to its next agenda item: consideration of a waiver request to the policy as submitted by BCCS representatives. Specifically, BCCS wanted an eight-year charter, not the four-year allowance given in policy. Their rationale was that most property owners and lenders would not approve a lease for less than eight years. Also, BCCS cited the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NASCA) policy guide that recommended an initial charter be a five-year contract. They argued that the board’s policy was more restrictive and had room to grant a waiver. The superintendent, board members, and BCCS president all engaged in the approximately 30-minute deliberation.
The deliberation began with superintendent, Dr. Fryer, reading a nearly five-minute prepared statement defending BCPS from the media’s portrayal of the board as unfriendly to charter schools. She felt BCCS had spent four months pressing the board for a “significant departure” from policy. Dr. Fryer believed it would be easier to deny the waiver than revoke the charter later if the school were not performing. She said she put “much research, conversation, and deliberation” into her recommendation that the board take action and deny the request. Mr. Elder followed with a 15-minute deliberation among board members. He felt the superintendent’s research was irrelevant and concerns unfounded. He made a motion to approve the waiver.

Ms. Hook felt BDPS did not have the budget to support a new charter school, and without knowing what governance issues would arise during an eight-year lease, could not support the waiver. Ms. Lang did not want to set a precedent with a waiver, Ms. Jones simply said she could not support it, and Ms. Polly was equally concerned about budget and the ability of BCCS to construct their planned lease space. Dr. Reever then called BCCS to the table.

Mr. Allen brought another parent with him and asked the board to clarify its concern about legal and financial risks. Ms. Hook responded stiffly that he had already heard the board’s feedback: “This shouldn’t be a point the finger at the board members and see why they’re saying what they’re saying. They have given their feedback.” Mr. Allen again asked them to define their concern about risk. Ms. Lang sharply said it would be a bad precedent to give a new charter school eight years. She added, “If that’s a legal risk, you can read it the way you want to.”
The parent who accompanied Mr. Allen encouraged the board to look at a waiver request differently. Rather than it being a precedent, he felt “the reason for the policy to have the authority to waive is to look at it from a case-by-case basis.” He said policy served as the baseline and waivers were individual exceptions allowable within the policy. Mr. Allen followed up by appealing to the board’s concern about accountability. He believed parents would be accountable first to the school, and if they leave the school, BCCS would no longer be financially viable, which would make the charter easy to revoke. Ms. Hook allowed the parents to finish speaking before she called for a vote on the motion Mr. Elder had made. The motion did not carry 4-3, and Mr. Allen thanked the board.

The BCCS parents subsequently decided to submit a new site plan, one that would be amenable to a five-year lease agreement. The change required BCCS to submit a new budget plan and all relevant facility documentation with the waiver requests. Given the tight timelines they were working under, BCCS submitted their materials for consideration two days later than the one-week advance required by board protocol. Despite the late submission, the school board still permitted the request to move forward for discussion at their March 28, 2012 meeting.

At that session, BDPS staff presented concerns regarding BCCS’s aggressive timeline for building out the property in time for a fall 2012 opening, not to mention tight budget constraints in the new budget plan. The superintendent then invited to the presentation table BCCS parents Mr. Allen and Ms. Mellin, along with realty property representative Mr. Holbrook. Mr. Allen disputed what he called staff’s erroneous concerns about the budget, indicating he included recommended line items per staff
recommendations. Mr. Holbrook attempted to allay the board’s concerns about fitting out the facility by referencing his many successful accomplishments with similar facilities and timelines.

At this point, Ms. Mellin became quite agitated and referenced another charter school set to open in August 2012. She pointed out BCCS had building permits secured that not even the other school had accomplished yet. The superintendent tried to clarify, and Ms. Mellin kept talking over Dr. Fryer despite the board president’s request to her to let the superintendent finish her comments. Dr. Fryer then requested the BDPS executive director of human resources speak about the burden already being placed on district resources to open one other new charter school and a renovated elementary school in the fall of 2012.

BCCS parents were undaunted by the challenges and they offered solutions. Ms. Mellin said, “May I offer a suggestion? Our staff could go and use computers in the central office to input the data that might be necessary.” She was looking for options and demonstrating how BCCS would be willing to work cooperatively to lessen the burden on district staff. Mr. Allen chimed in, “Where there’s a will, there’s a way, and we’ll find a way to make this work.”

Board member Ms. Lang described the predicament with the facility completion and having a principal hire staff as “the collision of all things at once.” Ms. Mellin retorted, “Some of it is collision, some is stars aligning.” She implored the board to be as flexible as its comfort level allowed, and she argued the school had a legitimate chance of opening successfully and being another asset for the community. Ms. Lang complimented Ms. Mellin for stating her point so well. Members of the BCCS
community in attendance at the meeting clapped in approval. Ms. Jones then insisted a
new principal needed to be hired first for the school. When BCCS parents wanted to
know if that was a rule, Dr. Fryer said she alone decided to have a principal hire staff.
Mr. Allen said he did not want staffing questions to delay the process. “I would argue it
is a manageable thing. It has its challenges. I think we can work through it.”

With little transition or clear conclusion to the conversation about hiring a
principal and staff, board member Mr. Elder suddenly made a motion to approve the
facility. The president called for discussion, and with none, a vote was taken and the
motion did not carry with a 4-3 vote. Ms. Mellin asked, “Can you state the reasons so we
can preserve our appeal rights?” Ms. Hook said reasons had been stated. Ms. Mellin
interrupted saying the alternatives being mentioned were not ones considered by BCCS,
and Dr. Fryer cut her off with a statement that opening late would require a waiver. Mr.
Allen pointed out BCCS had secured grants that would ready the facility in time and
allow for them to hire staff. He then challenged the board, saying:

Where do you as a board want to be? Do you want to be a board that’s saying yes
to this and we fail and it’s our fault, or do you want to be the ones that shot us
down and [didn’t give] us the schedule that we’re quite confident we’re going to
make? That’s a question for you.... We’d like to work with you to keep things in
motion rather than stopping them now.

In his response, Mr. Elder said the blame in the delays for BCCS rested with the
board. He believed in the property owner’s reputation and ability to complete the facility
on time, and he said local municipalities supported the project and would assist with all
permits for a timely opening. Ms. Mellin, Mr. Allen, and president Ms. Hook began
arguing and speaking over one another, with BCCS demanding reasons for the failed
motion. Comments became heated.
Mr. Allen: “You need to make a motion to deny then, and it’s stated for the record.”

Ms. Hook: “You know what? We are where we are. This is where we are right now!”

Ms. Mellin: “No, please!”

Ms. Mellin and Mr. Allen: “We have rights to appeal!”

Ms. Hook: “You do not have a right to be out of order! We have made a motion. It did not pass, and now we are at another point here.”

Ms. Mellin: “But as elected officials, I am going to ask again that you please state that if you have concerns with the timeline, a generic concern, I would really like to have some input and data on what rubric, because that seems to be a word known in education. What rubric are you using to determine that this schedule cannot be met?”

Ms. Hook: “I am following the recommendation of our staff. I trust they have done due diligence in looking at the timeline that has been given. All of the other details that go in place with their decision. So there is my decision. It’s made. That’s it!”

Mr. Allen continued debating. He felt BCCS was blind-sided by staff and board concerns. He wanted to know why no one responded to his request to forward questions to him. Dr. Fryer said he did not submit materials far enough in advance for such a turnaround. He referenced the other charter school getting ready to open that had not yet been issued a permit. He said, “I don’t understand the inconsistency here.” At this point, BCCS representatives were clearly agitated by what appeared to be a double standard. Ms. Mellin challenged the board, “All of that risk we have talked about, you are willing to accept for Midtown Montessori. Would you say that’s an accurate statement? Those who voted that way?” Ms. Lang said it wasn’t the same thing, and Mr. Allen continued the debate by asking how it was not.
Ms. Hook did not want to continue the conversation. However, she said she would take a motion from another board member to continue the dialogue. The BCCS parents looked at the board and asked for someone to step forward with a motion, even offering that one motion could be to change the deadline for BCCS. Dr. Reever spoke up, “I’ll make a motion to continue discussion because I am confused. I hate inconsistencies. And part of this aspect bothers me – tying the approval of the facility to the staffing. I’d like more discussion on that.” For a moment, a continued conversation was a possibility, especially since Mr. Kindle seconded the motion. Ms. Hook did not ask for discussion, called for a vote, and with a 4-3 outcome, the motion failed. This quick dismissal infuriated BCCS representatives.

Mr. Allen lashed out. “So you don’t even want to talk about it? There are hundreds of kids...Have you spent three years of your life doing this? We have!” Shouts of disapproval aimed at the board started coming from the audience. Ms. Mellin, who had been a BDPS board member several years before, placed one hand on Mr. Allen to hold him in his chair and put her other hand pleading in the air, “Please. This is your job though. When I sat there. This is your job to discuss this.” Mr. Allen then asked twice for a different decision. Both times, Ms. Hook interrupted him, telling him the decision was made.

Dr. Reever heeded the reminder of what the role of an elected board is: “I’d like to make a motion. If the building permit is approved by April 15 to get everything on board, I move that we approve the facility.” Mr. Elder seconded the motion, and when Ms. Hook called for a vote, he insisted on discussion. Ms. Mellin asked what would make the board comfortable, and Ms. Hook told her the board needed to talk. With
continued interruption from Ms. Mellin, the board president said, “This is ridiculous!”

Dr. Reever leaned back in her chair and put her hands to her head. Ms. Mellin reminded
Ms. Hook she was an elected official and BCCS needed time for discussion. Ms. Hook
said, “You have had your time,” and called for a vote. The motion failed 4-3.

Unable to accept the outcome, Ms. Mellin singled out Ms. Polly and said she had
supported charter processes in the past. Ms. Hook interjected, “Oh, Lordy!” Ms. Mellin
continued to argue, wanting to know why the other school was approved. As she tried to
sway the board, Ms. Lang leaned over to Ms. Hook and recommended to adjourn the
meeting. The gavel sounded.

A melee ensued next in the board room. Audience members in support of BCCS
stood up and yelled obscenities. A couple individuals rushed the dais. Several board
members hurried out a side door while the television crew cut the live feed. I asked staff
in the room to monitor the audience and call police if necessary as I secured a side room
where board members were. Eventually, I had to escort Ms. Hook out of the building to
her waiting husband and father who had seen how the meeting ended on TV and drove to
the site.

Board member and parent reflections.

The board members had varying recollections about how BCCS presented its
request. Ms. Jones thought BCCS, with its original eight-year charter request, misapplied
the NASCA guide by inferring that charter contracts should be longer than five years.
She felt no obligation to meet their request because she felt BCCS had been
disingenuous. Ms. Hook, however, thought there was room for compromise:
We met with our charter school groups and we worked on a policy that would be more charter school friendly, something that all parties would feel more comfortable about. Unfortunately, our board did not approve that because there was an issue with timing. You know, four years versus five years for the term, and that’s what held up that new policy. It’s a shame because that actually addressed some of the concerns that charters schools were facing and they shared that with us, so I think we let them down.

She was disappointed that the board was unable to reach a compromise.

Personally, though, Ms. Hook believed, “I still have to look at what’s best for the system.” She said BCCS did not influence her decision about policy because there were many other issues related to the applicant’s ability to meet deadlines, provide an adequate facility, and design a viable budget.

Ms. Lang, like Ms. Hook, knew the school board did not meet the BCCS parents’ expectation, but she took exception to how BCCS parents deliberated with the board, saying the following:

If I get that feeling from the way these folks behave and the way they talk and the way they’re condescending to us, then it’s hard for me to get past that. I have to work on it. I think it’s a fact of life. I know as a school board member that’s my job, but it’s hard because when they set up those barriers and that whole attitude that’s so palpable in the room, it’s just hard, you know?

Ms. Lang had expressed elsewhere in her interview the importance of hearing parents’ passions and frustrations. However, when BCCS brought forward emotion along with their research, she labeled these parents as condescending. Ms. Lang felt BCCS was engaged in deliberation hoping to have a “prep school at public expense,” and she said, “I just feel like that sometimes they’re taking unfair advantage of our school system.” Nevertheless, she eventually consented to providing a charter because BCCS met all necessary criteria. Ms. Jones also conceded that the deliberation persuaded her to
approve the charter. “BCCS told us what they thought was the best, why we should do it, and the reasons for it. In some ways, they were very influential.”

Mr. Elder noted that the board was split in its support for BCCS, and he framed the split as an outcome of the election process. He felt Mr. Kindle, Dr. Reever, and he were supported in their campaign by the BCCS parents and they were elected partially because of that support. Mr. Elder said, “Certainly, you’re going to be more receptive to what their views are, and of course, they already knew that we were on board with their views.” He viewed the entire policy deliberation with BCCS as part of a political process, but denied that BCCS had any extra influence on his decision making. Rather, a quid pro quo was at work. BCCS parents had voted for him, and therefore, knew they would have Mr. Elder’s vote in policy discussions. Ultimately, the BCCS applicants secured the necessary votes to have the BOE approve a charter, even though it was not for five years, as requested.

Even though BCCS did not prevail as they intended, they returned to the board on June 13, 2012 seeking further board action. Specifically, BCCS wanted approval for their facility to open in July 2013. They also wanted an amended budget approved, along with approval to hire a resident principal who did not need to have the state’s administrator certificate. Staff members sat at the table and presented their recommendations, while Mr. Allen answered questions from a podium next to the table. The board, staff, and Mr. Allen spent 44 minutes politely and respectfully debating various issues as they aligned with policy and state law. Mr. Elder put forward motions on each of the three issues. The facility and budget requests passed 6-1, but the request to have a resident principal failed with 4 opposed and 3 in favor. As Mr. Allen walked
out of the room, he looked at me, smiled, and said, “Two out of three. I’ll take it!” It
took three years for BCCS to finally prevail. They may not have opened on the
timeframe they had hoped, but securing board approval for the facility and budget were
major accomplishments attained through what they deemed was their perseverance.

A few weeks after the June meeting, I met with the BCCS focus group, comprised
of six parents who had attended board meetings during the case study period, and asked
them to reflect on the experiences with the school board. They first spoke about how the
board engages parents in general, and then were more specific about their personal
experience.

We discussed procedures first. They felt a certain contingent of citizens, those
who visit the school district’s website, know procedures exist. They complimented the
board on posting a section about how parents can be involved. A few participants even
noted there was a handbook the board created for itself to guide public meetings and
parent participation.

The BCCS parents described the board as respectful, and they could not think of a
time a speaker was cut off for going over the time limit during public comment. The
BCCS focus group members detailed how they strategically mobilize to maximize the use
of public comment. “It’s not something that one of us just haphazardly stands up. We
specifically look at what our agenda items are....” They gave assignments to each other,
and because they agreed on who was representing which point when, BCCS parents did
not feel they needed to have mass attendance at meetings. The group commented on
other parents outside of BCCS whom they had seen speak at meetings, saying others had
inappropriately used public comment for individual issues which could be resolved at the
school level. In general, though, they thought clear guidelines existed for public comment.

_A secret place with secret rules._

Outside of public comment, BCCS parents were more critical of board meeting protocols. They reflected on their own experiences deliberating with the board, particularly the March 28, 2012 meeting when the meeting ended abruptly with the gavel. “That was not according to any kind of policy. [The board was] really out of order the way that was...So when you talk about following the rules...there is a beginning, middle and end to meetings.” One participant said a board could take a break and reconvene when things get overheated. The sentiment of the group was that the board loosely followed Robert’s Rules of Order.

BCCS participants questioned if “tried and true” methods of order were best for today’s parents. One focus group member said, “There are policies and practices which are not effective because they’re not aligned with what’s really going on in the parent community.” A different participant used an analogy between the horse and buggy and the Model T. She said nobody had questioned how things had been done for hundreds of years until Ford wanted to mass produce the Model T. A gentleman in the group agreed that there is nothing wrong with a horse and buggy, but there should be options.

BCCS parents then gave examples of a couple hidden rules that complicated parent engagement. First, the board would set what time parents had to present, and in one case, parents felt a 1:15PM time slot was not conducive for parent schedules. Second, parent commenters at board meetings were seen as guests. “We’re being invited into kind of their secret world to speak.” Taking on the posture of a board member, one
participant quipped, “If you have a deadline, we don’t care. It’s kind of our secret place and we’re kind of doing our thing and you’re just kind of window dressing because we have to do this public comment thing.” Another participant agreed, “I feel that the unwritten rule is that they want to look like they’re listening to people, but their agenda is their agenda.” BCCS parents summarized their journey as a road filled with stumbling blocks, despite their best efforts to follow the written and unwritten rules.

BCCS parents also discussed how the school board engaged them in decision-making processes and to what degree they felt like partners. They described an adversarial relationship where board members gave feedback to parent participants only when a point is in dispute. A poignant moment in the conversation occurred when a BCCS participant expressed the desire to be more collaborative, and then defined what that would look and feel like:

They [the board] love to use the word collaborative, but they always use the wrong definition of it because collaborative has two definitions. It can be truly cooperating and both parties engaging and creating something together, or a collaborative can be basically yielding to a power that’s higher than you, like collaborating with the enemy.

Despite the fact they felt as if they were yielding to an enemy, BCCS parents still believed in school board public meetings, holding on to that democratic wish. “The public forum that takes place at these board meetings is the only way, in many cases, for our group to request something, to bring something to light that isn’t being done possibly the way it ought to be done.” The parents explained they had responsibility to speak up for what they thought was fair and right.

BCCS parents also saw themselves as being well-versed on principles that are important in their children’s education. “Parents are more engaged and involved because
they’re more educated and they want more for their own kids.” Sometimes, though, the parents believed critically acclaimed experts, those with more stature or credentials in the academic community, could wield power that they might. One BCCS parent said he had valuable contacts such as Jeanne Allen, president of The Center for Education Reform. He wanted to say to the school board, “Go talk to the people more expert than us. They’re going to give you a broader perspective that could be really beneficial...If you don’t want to engage us, can you at least engage some of these other people?”

Even with their evident frustration, at one point in the conversation, BCCS parents took a sympathetic turn to the board’s position in decision-making processes. They felt the school board was placed in a bad spot because of federal mandates that are top-down. Parents witnessed the board struggle and heard how board members did not agree with curriculum mandates. One BCCS parent said he wanted the local board to go to the state board and say no to mandates, but he doubted if the board could unite with their message and wondered if the board members would be willing to fight. He wanted them to stand for something. “If you don’t know as a community member what they [the board] stand for really, you don’t feel like it’s easy or meaningful to engage them in policy discussions.”

BCCS parents felt they needed to have a sense of where the board was heading; otherwise, they would not even know in which decisions they could participate. For instance, the parents felt the board did not champion its local power, noting that parents could support the board if it pushed back against state mandates. “We don’t want to have the following mandates put on us. Let us have some more local control in whatever areas
we think we can get broad agreement.” In dialogue about roles, parents described what support they could offer.

**We are not sheep.**

BCCS parents believed advocacy was their key role. However, when the board, superintendent, or PTA leaders asked parents to advocate for public education with local and state politicians, the BCCS parents said the larger parent community acted like “blind sheep” who bleated, “Please fully fund education,” without truly knowing what they were asking. The focus group agreed that advocacy has to start somewhere with something familiar; specifically, they proposed advocacy usually starts with one’s own child. One BCCS parent said, “It does start out with I’m doing this for my kid, and when you meet the parents and the people in the street and on the email, you realize that you’re doing it for them, too.” In this sense, proxy agency is at work when one feels she is representing others. Another parent, whose advocacy had evolved into proxy agency, concurred: “Now my role, when I’m at the table, I’m no longer just advocating for Kendall and Keith. I’m now advocating – and I can see the moms and the dads that come through.”

BCCS parents agreed that their own children’s interests motivated them to initially engage, but they felt that type of individualized advocacy was best handled at the school level with teachers.

BCCS parents felt another important stance they assumed was that of experts to inform and educate the community and the board. Priding themselves on their research so they could rectify mistaken perceptions, they felt it was their duty to inform the public of what was actually happening in policy conversations. “So we begin to have to correct misnomers and that type of thing for the board members. It’s really an opportunity to
educate the board members and the public. Right?” The tone of the BCCS parents’
conversation was not critical. They truly believed board members and the community at
large did not have the time or resources to study all topics in depth; therefore, parents
could help fill the gap.

The BCCS parents’ last comment about school boards lacking capacity to be
omnipotent on all subjects they discuss, combined with the suggestion parents can fill the
gaps, provides a smooth transition to the second narrative. On September 26, 2011, the
school board listened to my report on the high school block schedule format. Board
members then agreed to solicit information from parents.

**Parent Researchers on high school block schedule.**

The board’s desire to solicit parents for feedback on the block schedule did not
come as a surprise to me. As I finished presenting my findings about the district’s history
and understanding of the high school block schedule, I got the sense certain board
members had not heard what they wanted hear. They did not ask questions and appeared
restless, as if they wanted to move the agenda along. Dr. Reever said she had received
feedback from parents in the community where she lived, and that they did not like the
block schedule because they believed class periods were too long and students did not
have continuity throughout the year. Dr. Reever wanted to hear from parents.

While Ms. Hook agreed that hearing from parents would be helpful, Ms. Jones
hesitated on parents playing a larger role. She felt BDPS staff were the experts, and
“hauling in people from all over” could unnecessarily upset some parents. Yet, another
member, Mr. Elder, countered, “Adding outside perspective is helpful. We need to hear
from the customer, the parents, to see how it works out on their end.” He showed a
willingness to hear ideas that were not held by him, the board, or staff. More importantly, Mr. Elder categorized the school system as a marketplace and parents as consumers who would evaluate their satisfaction with a specified product.

Following the meeting, board members indicated to the superintendent they would be interested in parents conducting an independent study; therefore, the superintendent approached the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) executive council and asked the organization to spearhead an effort to gather data for the school board. The expectation was that parents would present their findings to the board. The PTA responded to the call for action in two ways. First, they held a parent forum on November 30, 2011. Then, they designed an online survey that was administered for three weeks in December 2011. PTA leadership presented a final report at a public meeting on March 14, 2012.

The parent forum had approximately 64 parents in attendance, the vast majority of whom were White and female. Ms. Payne, PTA council president, and Ms. Dent, 2nd vice president, facilitated the 90-minute meeting that took place at 7:00 p.m. in the BDPS board room. The superintendent and I were available to answer questions. Ms. Dent invited parents to speak. As she handed parents a microphone, she asked them to say their name and the high school they were associated with. As I took notes, I noticed that parents represented the county’s geography with at least one parent from each of the ten high schools in attendance.

By the end of the meeting, I had identified 16 different topics parents raised about the block format. The overall tenor of the meeting was collegial and respectful. Parents did not interrupt each other, and they used each other’s arguments as points of reference
to make their own case. Seven parents supported the block format because students could accelerate their classes and have more options available during their four years in high school. Three parents appreciated the personalization and opportunity for academic intervention that occurred with the block format. Eight other supporters thought students could be more focused with fewer transitions in the day and with fewer classes giving homework compared to a seven-period day. Five parents felt strongly that English needed to be yearlong, as did six parents and one student who wanted music and world language courses to span the entire year. As an alternative to the either-or approach most parents had been taking, 13 parents supported the idea of a hybrid schedule that could incorporate semester and yearlong classes. The meeting ended with Ms. Dent telling parents she would incorporate their ideas in the PTA’s report back to the board.

One week later, the PTA released its survey that resulted in 2,246 responses and reflected an approximately 22% response rate of all high school households. According to the BDPS research coordinator (personal communication, December 28, 2011), this return rate was slightly higher than other systemic surveys previously administered by the school system. The survey contained seven multiple choice and three open-ended questions. Seventy-six percent of respondents reported being satisfied with the current model, with 54% very or somewhat interested in exploring alternatives. Rather than including recommendations at the end of the report, the PTA listed advantages of the current block schedule, along with comments that captured major themes from the open-ended questions.

The PTA president and second vice president presented the survey findings on March in 14 minutes via a PowerPoint presentation. During the meeting, the
superintendent noted the community appeared to be conveying a wish to stay the course and there was not an overwhelming majority wanting change. Despite what appeared to be a clear majority supporting the current model, Ms. Hook pointed out there still was over 50% of respondents interested in exploring options. Ms. Hook felt some parents were for the block schedule and some were against. She offered that a hybrid schedule might be a compromise, but for now, the board would stay the course.

The board’s conversation and questions lasted approximately 13 minutes, with the approved meeting minutes showing board members interested in examining two possible options to the block schedule. Ms. Jones stated, “This really gave us the information we needed, and I’m glad to see that because of your survey, we’re going on.” In her interview weeks later, Ms. Jones characterized the parent results as “a little split” and went on to say, “I don’t think they influenced us as much as our staff influenced us because we felt our staff knew [more].” Ms. Hook also said of the board’s decision, “The verdict’s still out on that one.”

Even if parents could not produce a compelling reason for change, at least one board member may have been swayed by emotion or argument. Ms. Lang said of the PTA presentation, “If you want to come to the board and just present a bunch of research and some things that you’ve done with surveys and so forth, that’s a kind of cut and dry way to do it.” She expected more deliberation, saying, “I don’t think I heard the passion and the frustrations or the overwhelming emotional presentation with this.” For Ms. Lang, the lack of emotional appeal prevented her from making any changes to the schedule.
The board member interviews regarding the block schedule occurred approximately five months after the parents’ presentation. Not a single board member recalled a decision other than staying the course. Yet, the minutes from the meeting indicated, “Board members stated interest in examining two possible options for block schedules; split block and modified time.” The superintendent indicated she would ask staff to explore the options and come back at another time, but the issue seemed to lose momentum as no action was ever taken by the BOE or staff in subsequent months.

The length, intensity, and scope of deliberation in the decision-making process surrounding the block schedule case vastly differed from the Brooke Classical Charter School case. The PTA leaders appeared only once before the board in March 2012, and during the nearly five-month window that the PTA solicited parent feedback, not a single parent ever approached the BOE at a public meeting with a position about the block schedule. Conversely, the BCCS proponents appeared six times before the BOE between October 2011 and June 2012. One of those occasions was at the behest of the board who wanted charter school advocates to engage in conversation about existing charter policies. Additionally, there were 25 instances during the same time span that parents made public comment.

Following the PTA leaders’ presentation, I asked Ms. Dent to assist me with assembling a focus group of parents who had been actively involved in the process to give block schedule feedback to the board. Eight parents, seven females and one male, all of whom were White and represented two of the ten high schools, gathered on June 29, 2012. The group reflected on board meeting logistics, processes, and the roles they as parents played during the process.
Spoken and tacit guidelines.

Block schedule parents acknowledged they understood some formal guidelines for interacting with the board. In the focus group, one parent cited written documentation that confirmed meeting logistics. “Well, it’s on the BDPS website under Board of Ed. There’s a handbook in there that talks about public comment and when it’s appropriate.” In addition to the website reference, other parents added that the board president announces there are three minutes for parents to speak during the meetings, and that personal and personnel matters are not permitted during parent comments. Because the same protocols existed in writing and in verbal direction, block schedule parents felt any citizen who would not be aware of website resources would still be informed prior to speaking to the board.

Beyond the publicized guidelines, the focus group believed hidden rules are learned through experience in attending meetings. A parent who served on a town commission board said she instinctively knew what rules existed. But not everyone has that instinct. A PTA president in the group said he felt he learned from going to meetings and watching. “Nobody ever told me, ‘These are the rules.’ You go to a meeting and you sit beside somebody else that speaks all the time.” Another parent agreed and suggested the learning process is incremental. “If you attend more than one meeting, you learn a little bit every time, but then you figure it out.”

If rules are important for engagement, is it equally important that they are followed? One parent recalled that Mr. Elder rearranged the order in which parents participated. She believed the sign up list for speakers at meetings should be followed in order and that, “the board should always stick to the same routine.” The group agreed
that the board needed to follow their rules, but they noted any community member who participates at a board meeting should also follow the rules. One parent said participants need to be respectful of the board, conceding, “I may not always agree with them but let’s face it; they’re an elected body, so you have to have a certain degree of respect and decorum when you speak to them.” No written or verbal board guidelines refer to civility, but block parents thought it was a tacit expectation.

**Do parents make a difference?**

Despite block schedule parents’ expectations for mutual civility in their exchanges with the board, they had a dubious disposition about how open the board was to their recommendations. One bemoaned, “I feel in many cases the board has a preconceived notion and they are really heading in a certain direction.” A different parent corroborated this sentiment, saying, “I always think they just want to hear that we agree with them, but they’re going to be surprised that they’re not going to be agreed with.” Parents feel daunted in their ability to make an impact on what they perceived to be a board that operated as a block. One parent explained why making an impact was a challenge:

I feel like the Board of Ed wants our input. They want to hear what we have to say, but then they’re going to do what they want to do. Maybe it’s lip service or just maybe it’s just pleasing the parents and saying, “we did have your input.” You know- professional courtesy. “We want to show that we are involving our parents in the process, and we did that. But now we’re going to do what we want to do,” whether or not it’s based on our input.

Once the parents finished discussing their thoughts about the potential to make impact, they turned to the actual impact they felt they made when they presented their findings about the block schedule format. In this case, they believed their involvement
actually stopped a potentially bad decision moving forward. What follows is a variety of their observations:

“The With no parental input, some decision would have been made and it could have very likely been bad for a lot of kids.”

“So we slowed it down.”

“Brought it to a halt.”

“I think it came off the tracks.”

“It was derailed.”

“All right! No one was injured in the process!”

“So in a way, we were heard, but not really listened to, or listened to but not really heard. You know what I mean? They heard that people were unhappy.”

“They shelved it.”

“But I think it was kind of good to put the brakes on.”

I asked the focus group participants if they believed there was a clear outcome to their process. Their sense was that the board made an opaque decision, so I prompted them to think about why the decision appeared muddled. One parent explained, “There was a melding of issue between whether it was a four-block or seven-block, and to a lot of people, those issues melded together and they couldn’t separate them out.” The parents felt they witnessed and recognized the board’s struggle with a decision that could yield no clear cut answer. The male parent in the group said, “It is not a simple A or B. They probably need to look at some sort of compromise of the two things and that to me gives them a lot more information for making the best decision that will help the most. It’s not going to be perfect for everybody, but that will be the best for most of the kids.”

Parents understood the diversity of opinions that came forward, and they remarked how a
school board can never satisfy everyone in a system as large as BDPS. They said that sometimes too many opinions would give the board too much to think about, and that’s not what the board wants.

**Who we are.**

If an array of issues somehow stymies a board’s decision-making process, I asked the block schedule parents which strategies are most effective when they are engaged in policy discussions. One parent expressed, “You have to have those tenacious parents who are willing to do it day in and day out to actually force change. You have to get the press on your side. Typically you have the press reporting...that’s how people know; otherwise, you don’t even know.” The male parent in the group wanted to make sure that tenacity did not equate with being difficult. He countered, “People think squeaky wheel with a negative connotation. It doesn’t necessarily have to be negative. If you’re persistent enough and loud enough – once one person makes that decision to stand up and say, ‘Yes, I’m going to be heard,’ that empowers a lot of people.” Many in the group nodded when he used the word empower.

The notion of empowerment continued as a theme as the group discussed their roles as parents who engaged in decision making with the board. Their first thoughts trended to parents as advocates. One parent said she started by representing her two children, but she eventually represented the whole community where she lived. The group agreed with one comment that advocacy was not easy. “Advocacy is hard work. You typically don’t get what you want in all cases. You might get a small portion or a modification.” A couple parents explained further that parents who want change can’t just go away if an issue is important to them. They have to fight, and in the end, the
parents who engage in the system become the best advocates because they understand how the system works.

Parents perceived themselves as more than advocates; indeed, there were many times that parents accepted responsibility as proxy agents for others who might not be as willing to approach the board. One parent was passionate about her role, “I’m speaking for the benefit of the people who would never get up on that microphone because it doesn’t faze me to get up get up on that microphone—ever.” The male in the group tried to make sense of the dual nature he has when he engages in conversations with the board, “As a PTA president from one of the schools, I tried to express what the parents want. They don’t want to get up and speak, but they want to make sure that message is also being heard, even if it disagrees with mine. I feel obligated.” Two others in the focus group looked at self-described advocates and thanked them for being so strong. They said they relied on the advocates to be brave, and they were happy to stay in the audience in a supportive role.

A third role parents identified was that of expert. Often, board members do not have children in the school system, they noted, so there is no way for the board to have first-hand experience with how policies are implemented. The block schedule parents thought they had done the board a favor by conducting research:

I was thinking they don’t know enough about block scheduling. So they were getting our input. We did the research. We Googled it. We learned about it and we’re saving them time and we’re educating them a little bit on the pros and cons. There’s a lot of information out there. It takes a lot of time to research it and I’m not sure if the board of ed, some of them, I think, take the time. Some of them, I think, show up for meetings so they don’t really know where it works and where it doesn’t work. So we’re feeding them that information and then they can draw their own conclusions.
The focus group parents admitted that not all parents put the time into board policy issues like they do, which is why they tried to find other ways for high school parents to weigh in on the block schedule matter. They speculated the survey was a tool that gave some parents cover who otherwise did not want their name or face associated with an opinion. Ultimately, one parent concluded, “The board got the most accurate information on what the majority of what the parents in this county feel on how this was handled because there was the forum and there was the survey.” The focus group rested on the fact they had done their homework as requested. Aligning with their perceived role as experts, they were as thorough as possible so that the board could make a decision with all available information.

**Conclusion to Narrative Findings**

Narratives are an integral part of how people construct meaning out of their experiences. They illustrate what did not happen and much as what did happen. Within the context of researching organizational and political dynamics, an effective storyline “hinges on an ability to play with multiple insights with a view to integrating them into a coherent pattern” (Morgan, 2006, p. 357). The story of how the Brooke District Public Schools Board of Education engaged parents in decision-making processes is told from the insights of board members, parents, and my position as a participant observer. All of us saw the driving desire to have parents involved in the school district’s decision-making processes. Each of the case study storylines had unique characteristics, but both shared essential narrative components that revealed integrated patterns: an initiated and rising action centered on conflict, a climax, and an outcome.
In each case, the school board initiated a process to engage parents. For the Brooke Classical Charter School, the invitation started with the newly elected school board reversing the previous board’s decision to deny the charter. This conflict led BCCS to the table to simultaneously resubmit a charter proposal and give recommendations for a school system policy regulating charter schools. In a climactic moment that involved heated behavior and a pounding gavel, the school board denied policy waiver requests and plans for the school to open. Eventually, the board and BCCS found common ground so the school could open. In the second narrative, high school block schedule parents performed research at the request of the board. They addressed the conflict some board members saw as a gap between what staff was implementing and what parents thought was best for their children. Armed with data from a parent forum, a survey, and personal research, they presented findings to the board that showed multiple perspectives, a point serving as a calm climax in this narrative. For these parents, unlike the BCCS parents, the outcome was not as clear because staff had been requested to follow-up on the topic with the board in the future.

Clearly, both narratives show that the school board engaged parents who played active roles in decision-making processes. There was a centrally defined issue for each case. Each took place over time. Multiple individuals from different perspectives were involved. Direct dialogue occurred between board members and parents. These factors were all part of a progression as opposed to being one-time siloed events. Parents and board members in public arenas followed processes, stated their positions, justified them, exercised equal opportunity to give voice, and wanted to do common good for the best
interest of students. I will discuss in the chapter that follows how these actions are consistent with tenets associated with deliberative democracy.
Chapter Five

Findings: Thematic Analysis of Rules, Roles, and Deliberative Actions

As I studied how the elected school board engaged parents, I realized they were being very intentional in how and why they wanted parents to be part of their decision making. Board members were elected through a democratic process, and I believe they wanted to make sure they fulfilled promises made to their constituency. Among those promises was a desire for parent input on decisions they make. School boards are often criticized for one-way communication that entails parents speaking at a microphone without receiving any direct interplay with board members, as Sokoloff (1996) described. The BDPS school board demonstrated in these two cases how it broke from that mold and wanted parents to be at the presentation table during board meetings. As I watched the cases unfold, I believed I was seeing deliberative democratic practices in action.

Both cases included many of the important components of deliberative democratic practices. Specifically, the school board and parents were involved in two-way dialogue that followed established processes, allowed each party to justify positions, and considered the common good for students. The literature I reviewed revealed just how important these characteristics are for deliberative democracy. Since, in many cases, the data aligned with deliberative democratic tenets, I developed four themes around which I organized my findings: (1) rules of engagement, (2) procedural conceptions, (3) enacted roles, and (4) binding actions.

The board’s rules of engagement showed how purpose, processes, and practices mattered. The two case studies revealed that the school board’s engagement with parents was not coincidental. For the school board to meet its specific goals and make its
decisions, board members and parents knew that certain protocols would need to be followed. The data indicate that, for those involved in the process, some rules were clear. Board members verbally articulated the rules and also had the protocols published online; despite this transparency, the rules were not always followed. Moreover, parents had to infer certain protocols as some rules were hidden.

Because they were involved in a process, parents of both groups believed they had important roles. Advocate, proxy agent, and expert emerged in strikingly similar ways from both groups. BCCS and block schedule parents established advocacy as a stance that starts with one’s own child. Individualized advocacy then evolves to serve the greater good of “what’s best” for students and the system. While parents never used the word “proxy,” they clearly articulated how they were performing a function in place of another. Proxy agency is a type of advocacy, but because parents explained the evolution and articulated the difference between acting on behalf of their own child versus representing other parents, I established these as two different roles. Parents also saw themselves as experts on charter school policy and scheduling formats. They depicted an expert as one who has the time and resources to get as much information as possible. Board members similarly characterized parents in the aforementioned roles, but one board member suggested an additional stance, lobbying. Lobbying goes beyond the local school board to other agencies and political bodies where parents can have influence.

The actions following the deliberative forums were outcomes that were as important as the processes. The board, in both cases, made decisions at the end of the process. The BCCS parents did not get everything they wanted but gladly accepted a “better yes” that yielded two out of three requests approved. While BCCS outcomes
were definitive and actionable, block schedule parents described an opaque decision. The school board did not take formal action with a vote, and the parents did not have any further actions to complete. Here, no decision was a type of decision, but the parents did not recognize it as such.

Deliberative democracy will frame the thematic analysis that follows. I explore each theme and subtheme independently. However, the data analysis will be comparative, as I discuss case-specific and cross-case phenomena.

**Rules of Engagement for Deliberative Democracy**

**Purpose.**

Deliberative democracy generally creates conditions for citizens to justify positions. In doing so, four related purposes exist: legitimizing collective decisions, allowing public-spirited perspectives, correcting mistakes, and encouraging mutually respectful processes, (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). The BDPS school board demonstrated in each case how it was able to fulfill the first three aims.

The board was explicit in its intent to involve BCCS and other charter school leaders in its discussion of Policy 440. The February 22, 2012 board meeting minutes said “an invitation was extended to representatives of the charter schools to submit comments on the policy” (electronic document, retrieved July 1, 2012). This act was purposeful in two ways. First, the public invitation legitimized the board’s decision-making process. By submitting commentary on the policy, charter school leaders would expect to see evidence of their input reflected in any changes to policy. They could hold the board accountable to being open to their feedback, thus, legitimizing a process intended to engage the parents. Second, the board’s invitation to multiple charter school
representatives suggested a commitment to a decision that would be collective. The board did not intend to make a policy decision in isolation. It actively sought commentary from charter school leaders and established an agenda that would bring the discourse related to Policy 440 to the public arena.

It is important to note the collective decision was not limited to the board and charter school parents. The school system’s attorney and the charter school liaison were tasked with bringing their recommendations forward, as well. The attorney began by acknowledging the written commentary BCCS submitted per the board’s solicitation; however, she said she did not extensively review the comments due to their length and shared her perception that the comments were not relevant to the policy at hand. These opening statements immediately marginalized and qualified the input the charter schools had given. Her editorial remarks easily could have chilled deliberation. I believe this interplay showed how fragile a collective process can be when one participant appears to have the ability to discount another party’s involvement. Had the board members listened to the attorney and set aside the opportunity they had extended to the charter school parents, they would have delegitimized their publicly stated intent to engage parents in a policy decision.

What happened next, though, was a defining moment that demonstrated how a school board could encourage public-spirited perspectives. As I witnessed, and the meeting minutes noted, the BCCS president, Mr. Allen, “joined Ms. Nichols [school system attorney] and Dr. Sands, Charter School Liaison, to discuss changes they would like to see in Board Policy 440.” This act was significant in three ways. First, the board’s purpose to engage the parents in a policy decision extended beyond private
communication that would be conducted through written correspondence. The board afforded Mr. Allen the opportunity to speak in a publicized setting that was televised and had newspaper media coverage. This openness was a sharp contradiction to a community member’s recent criticism of the board’s approach to Policy 440; in a letter to the editor, the citizen asserted that the board was making charter school decisions behind closed doors, without charter school directors present. The individual who wrote the letter had never attended a board meeting, nor was his name ever mentioned in any BCCS documents. Therefore, this letter showed there was a member of the public taking interest in a potentially contentious issue and served as a call for perspectives to be shared publicly.

While the letter may not have been the cause for the board to make a procedural shift, the change did serve a second significant deliberative democratic purpose: correcting mistakes. When multiple people come together to make decisions, errors are bound to happen. In this case, the charter school parents and at least one member of the public perceived the board making a mistake by holding conversations behind closed doors. Holding a non-public meeting also conveyed the perception that the board would be the sole decision maker. Therefore, when board members invited Mr. Allen and other charter parents to be at the table with staff, they symbolized their intent to have parents as public and equal partners in the decision-making process. The visual was important; parents were side-by-side with staff, using the same table and microphones. They had the same amount of time and equal access to board members. In sharp contrast from assertions in the policy governance literature I reviewed in Chapter 2, which indicated board members should deliberate only among themselves on matters of policy, the BDPS
board intentionally changed the decision-making circle. By inviting and enveloping parents in the process, and conducting board business publicly with the charter school parents sharing their perspectives, they were righting what was perceived to have been a wrong.

The school board’s intent to involve the high school block schedule parents in a collective decision-making process was equally overt. However, the board did not facilitate the block schedule deliberation in the same way it did with BCCS. Impartial facilitation is important during deliberative processes, and with skilled facilitators, “participants can learn about the issues under deliberation and be empowered to challenge arguments and reflect on the preferences and positions of themselves and others” (Dryzek & Hendriks, 2012). The minutes from the September 26, 2011 meeting said staff would solicit feedback and come back to the board with next steps; however, immediately after the meeting, the superintendent asked PTA leadership to spearhead the charge. The board intended to include parents, but it did not have a clear plan of action, nor did it personally extend an invitation to parent leaders as it did with BCCS. Instead, the board delegated the invitation to the superintendent and asked her to direct the PTA to engage parents on its behalf.

Not only did the board delegate the invitation, it delegated the deliberation. Face-to-face deliberation occurred on the block schedule issue during the November 30, 2011 forum, but it was parent-to-parent. The PTA leaders facilitating the event said they would listen to all the perspectives, take notes, and incorporate ideas in a summary for the board. Board members told me in personal conversation prior to the meeting that they were not going to attend the forum because they thought parents would be more
honest in a gathering held by parents for parents. At first, it appeared board members had casually abdicated a responsibility to hear directly from parents, but their intent went beyond getting feedback. The board’s implied purpose was to support a deliberative process that would allow parents a safe space for expressing divergent views. To accomplish their intent, the board needed to delegate the deliberation to parent leaders who would facilitate the discourse among interested parents who joined the forum.

The school board’s purpose to engage parents in a collective decision-making process exhibiting multiple viewpoints served as a common theme between the two cases. Board members publicly acknowledged they wanted parents to be involved in deliberations about policies that governed the school system’s operation. In one case, the board was even open to correcting a perceived mistake regarding discussions they were having in closed sessions. The cases diverge in how the board acted on its intent. With BCCS, the board overtly invited parents to the table, whereas in the block scheduling case, it delegated the invitation and one phase of the process to staff and the PTA leaders. Regardless of how the board enacted its purpose to engage parents, the goal was accomplished. Parents affiliated with both cases engaged in deliberative processes that aided the board in its decision making. It is to a deeper look at the processes I now turn.

Procedural elements.

In this section, processes are discussed as the procedural elements that structure the resultant practices. Habermasian procedures are purist in nature and consider only the laws that traditionally govern decision making, whereas more contemporary theorists of deliberative democracy contend substantive principles, such as individual freedom and equal opportunity, can complement the traditional procedures (Bachtiger, Niemeyer,
Neblo, Steenbergen, & Steiner, 2010; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). The cases indicated how both traditional and contemporary procedures were evident in school board proceedings with parents.

The school board utilized one widely recognized and traditional procedural structure, Robert’s Rules of Order. Ms. Lang was elected to the board after the protocols had been adopted, but in her interview, she twice mentioned the formality of Robert’s Rules. In reference to an individual who spoke out of turn at a meeting, she said, “We do say we follow Robert’s Rules, and if we do, then you don’t talk out.” Ms. Lang’s admonishment demonstrated her understanding of the board’s collective commitment to the rules, and her interpretation of the protocol followed a traditional proceduralist’s stance to follow the letter of the law.

Ms. Lang was not the only participant who understood the formal procedures. Triangulating the data from the board survey, two focus groups, four board member interviews, and my own personal observations, I detected a nearly unanimous understanding of other formally adopted board meeting protocols for public comment. Four of the five board survey respondents said they agreed with the statement that there are clear policies that direct parents on how they can participate in the local board’s decision-making processes. Parents from both focus groups, as did three board members during their interviews, easily listed the formal rules: sign up to speak; speak at the microphone during public comment time; adhere to three minutes for an individual or five minutes for a group; do not mention personnel matters; allow 30 minutes total for public comment. All were aware that the rules were published on the district’s website and in a manual. Also, everyone confirmed the board president publicly announces the
protocols prior to public comment. In the past eight years, I have attended approximately 130 board meetings and can verify the president, without exception, read the traditional protocol at each session. The BDPS elected school board demonstrated its formal procedures through its written and verbal directions for public comment, along with its adoption of Robert’s Rules of Order.

The explicit protocols that governed the board’s decision making were traditional and apparently clear to all. However, board members and parents acknowledged a layer of implicit rules. The hidden rules exemplified contemporary theories of deliberative democracy that involve substantive principles related to personal moral principles. For instance, when I asked Ms. Hook about any hidden rules at the board meetings, she laughed about her experiences with certain parents and said, “Don’t make threats!” During my interview with Ms. Jones, she stated an unwritten rule for parent participants at meetings was to be organized and clear. And during a focus group conversation, one BCCS parent, mimicking a board member, said, “I feel that the [board’s] unwritten rule is that ‘we want to look like we’re listening to people.’” Finally, a block schedule parent speculated on how hidden rules are learned over time through experience at board meetings: “You learn a little bit every time, but then you figure it out....”

The informal rules as understood by board members and parents intimate deliberative democratic practices are not governed by formal and traditional procedures alone. Substantive principles such as respect and preparedness were valued. Respect could be shown if parents avoided using threatening language during deliberation. Board members, likewise, could show respect by genuinely listening to parents and not just sitting at the dais for appearance’s sake. Parents sensed they had to “learn the ropes” in
order to be organized enough to participate at board meetings, and board members appreciated parents who were prepared to participate in an articulate manner. None of these procedures appeared anywhere in writing because each was a moral principle that contributed to a mutually respectful deliberative process.

The unwritten processes combined with the formal ones demonstrated the complementary nature of traditionalist and contemporary deliberative theories. Proponents of traditionalist processes believe in order and structure. When such protocols are not followed, the result is a breakdown in the process. But, if board members start to ignore parents’ comments based solely on the order and not the content, the opportunity for deliberation ceases. Therefore, board members and parents identified civility, attentiveness, and knowledge as characteristics of the moral authority found in substantive principles that could complement the traditional approaches.

Blending traditional and contemporary deliberative democratic theories can balance practices that a school board enacts. How was the BDPS school board accountable to its rules? Did the school board publicly practice its processes? Did the school board and parents deliberate about a common good? The next section explores how the school board enacted its practices.

**Practices.**

Deliberative democratic practices require accountability, publicity, and a commitment to a common good (Chappell, 2012; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Marsh, 2011). When a school board is elected, it is accountable to the individuals for whom decisions are made. A board dedicated to the principle of publicity will make sure its forums are public so all interested participants can openly share their positions and justify
their reasons. Finally, school board members and parents deliberate around a common purpose, not individual desires.

BDPS board members believed the public needed to see them being accountable to procedural rules. During his interview, Mr. Elder gave an example of how a community member did not adhere to the rule about not mentioning personnel during public comment: “Last year when Bobby Grimes started to jump in and attack Ms. Hook, I stopped him and, you know, he’s been mad at me to this day because of that.” Mr. Elder’s experience suggested board members were willing to take responsibility and action when rules were violated. Additionally, the courage to be publicly accountable could come at a cost and potentially alienate a community member. Mr. Elder sensed this consequence, saying, “He may say I intimidated him from talking, but again, I felt it was the right thing to do because he was using it as an inappropriate tool to deliver what his message was.” Despite the consequence, a board member who showed a willingness to be accountable to accepted practices could likely build trust in those wishing to participate at board meetings. Parents could feel confident a board member would be true to procedures, assuming the protocols were deemed in advance to be fair, just, and agreed upon by all parties.

The three-minute limit for public speakers was another practice for which board members and parents were held accountable. The board not only monitored the procedural rule about time limits for speakers, but it enforced the rule with an auditory reminder. Parents and board members did recall times, though, when public commenters and the board broke the time limit rule.
From a board member and a parent’s perspective, breaking the time rules for public comment did not appear to be a negative experience. The comments suggested the board demonstrated an understanding that a speaker may not be able to finish within the time allotted. With that understanding, the board provided flexibility to break a rule and defer to a speaker. Demonstrating a willingness to change the rules on the spot to meet the needs of speakers also appeared to earn the admiration of the BCCS parents, who agreed they never saw the board turn anyone away. This indicated to them that the board was interested in hearing every voice that wanted to be heard. Accountability, then, becomes a practice that is conditional – if breaking a norm mutually benefits all parties, accountability is waived.

However, a different BCCS focus group parent did not agree breaking a rule was always acceptable. She understood public comment was time for comment, not dialogue between board members and speakers. Yet, she did not see the board assume accountability on this protocol on all occasions:

I do note that once in a blue moon that some board members, on occasion, will thank a speaker because it was an important issue. But more often than not, they will not comment at all, but when they do, it is to rebut something. So they hear things that go against individual board members’ beliefs or feelings, that ticks them off and they’ll say something. But very rarely will they say any positive acknowledgement.

Here, the parent intimated that breaking a rule can be acceptable on a conditional basis. If a board member were to compliment a speaker, breaking the code of silence would be forgiven. Yet, the parent suggested a rebuttal stance was a show of anger. This reflection demonstrates the tension between bureaucratic mindset and normative values. The result could be a lost opportunity for deliberative practice. Board members may
want to have dialogue and share divergent perspectives, but accountability to their own protocols can stifle the process.

Not only can accountability to rules cause tension for a school board, the publicity needed to give access and visibility to reason-giving can be challenging. Robert’s Rules of Order, while described earlier as an accepted procedure adopted by the board, revealed itself to be a norm that created tension for the board members. Board members felt formal rules at meeting meetings limited the quantity and quality of emotions and ideas that parents could express. Also, the cameras, microphones, and audience could make parents uncomfortable and stifle public reason-giving during deliberation.

A couple board members thought a relaxed public setting with no rules or order would open up conversation. As depicted in the board narrative, all four board members I interviewed wanted to sit and chat informally with parents. However, they did not agree on what type of public forum was most effective. Ms. Jones and Mr. Elder said informal teas, call-in television programs, and community chats had been offered to parents previously, but they were not successful modes of engaging parents. Their comments suggested challenges associated with the formality of agendas and rules were less problematic than the overall disposition of wanting to have meaningful and open two-way dialogue between board members and parents. Yet, as Dryzek and Hendriks (2012) contend, agendas, rules, and facilitated forums matter when practicing deliberative democracy. The tension board members experience exemplifies their struggle with balancing procedural formality with publicity. Does being public require cameras and microphones? Should public gatherings for discourse be open forums with no rules or
identified topics? What kind of public practices lend themselves naturally to deliberation?

Accountability and publicity are important deliberative practices, but the aim is for a common good. In the context of school boards and parents, the common good is framed within the notion of what is in the best interest of students. Ms. Jones reflected on the decision to deny BCCS its original request for an eight-year charter. She said the board had done that with another charter school and regretted it because the school did not meet academic standards. Because of that experience, she said in her interview, “We try never to make a decision that wouldn’t be the best for kids.” However, a BCCS focus group parent thought charter schools were in the best interest of students: “I definitely see that these types of schools could definitely yield improvement in student achievement. So for me, that’s the driving factor, number one.”

In the block schedule case, Ms. Hook commented during her interview that the decision to explore alternatives to the current model would actually be “best for the kids.” Even a block schedule focus group parent thought change could benefit the students: “I think it’s good to shake it up because these kids [say] ‘I hate school. It’s so boring.’” A different parent in the block schedule focus group elaborated:

It’s not going to be perfect for everybody, but that will be the best for most of the kids. Oftentimes, I feel like I don’t hear any business being done where the best interest of the kids is at heart. Just one time can somebody say “What’s best for the students?” Maybe they’re thinking it. I just want to hear it verbalized.

Both of these cases demonstrate how board members and parents have a mutual interest to do what is in the best interest of the students. They want students to enjoy school and have successful academic experiences. However, if parents do not hear the
board publicly relaying the sentiment, they may doubt the alignment of the common good. Furthermore, a generalized statement about what is best for students is not well defined. While it is a popular shared goal, I am left wondering how each parent and board member would evaluate a decision that is in a students’ best interest. Which students’ best interests are being served? Who is responsible for determining what is best for students? When participants in a pluralistic democracy work to serve a common good, these are just a couple of questions raised.

As the board enacted its procedures, it demonstrated core deliberative democratic practices: accountability, publicity, and commitment to a common good. Public accountability posed unique challenges and opportunities as formal and informal structures could enhance or inhibit parents’ participatory experiences. These procedures, though, show a narrow interpretation of accountability that, as a deliberative democratic tenet, emphasizes honoring constituents and outcomes. And even though board members and parents spoke about doing what was in the best interest of students, they never jointly defined what “best” meant and for which students. Through the procedures that create them, deliberative democratic practices can encounter barriers that jeopardize the ideal of all parties being able to give and understand mutually justifiable reasons that support their viewpoints. The act of being open to all perspectives requires hearing and listening, which will be explored further in the next section.

**Hearing versus listening: A value-laden rule.**

Parents and board members, through their interview reflections, revealed the importance of a tacit deliberative practice: hearing versus listening. Listening was revealed to be a procedural rule manifested in observable behavior. Yet, the wish to be
heard was normative and, thus, value laden as parents described what it felt like to be heard. Because the board members’ and parents’ observations were poignant and critical, I decided to give this practice its own space in this discussion about rules of engagement. Also, the literature defining deliberative democratic practices was rarely explicit about this tension. Often, the concept of hearing was subsumed in a broader conversation about reciprocity as an act that entails all participants justifying positions and being open to opposing perspectives. Expanding on the idea of reciprocity, Chappell (2012) was one author who attempted to explain the difference between hearing and listening:

This reciprocal quality of deliberation is grounded in the requirement to give reasons and justifications for our beliefs in the political forum. This presupposes respect for other citizens that is manifested by providing them with reasons for our beliefs and preferences and by listening to the reasons they in turn provide. The underlying assumption is that in the public, political forum citizens and politicians need to justify their stand on issues in a way that others will understand, if not necessarily accept. (p. 7)

This explanation indicates that deliberation entails listening. For those who listen to the justifications being offered, there is an assumption they will understand. Therefore, the implication is that listening is a physical act, and the cognitive process of understanding occurs through hearing.

Three board members independently talked about hearing and listening. Ms. Jones was quite explicit in how she defined hearing and listening. She felt hearing meant, “it goes in your brain and you think about it.” Her definition pointed to the cognitive element of hearing. The brain, not the ears, is the receptor; then, the brain has to do something with what it heard. Ms. Jones defended her fellow board members as being good listeners, but she wanted to change what she called a terrible perception about the board not being listeners. She hoped the board could “learn to hear” what parents
say. When Ms. Jones used the word *learn*, she was again suggesting a cognitive process that needed to occur. If board members demonstrated they had the ability to listen and learn, Ms. Jones implied the perceptions parents held of the board would improve.

Aligning with his goal to make the board more consumer-oriented, Mr. Elder framed hearing and listening within a customer service model. To achieve this aim meant listening to parents and treating them professionally and courteously. His interpretation of hearing suggested a non-cognitive process. Instead, he could demonstrate he heard parents through how he interacted with them. This suggested he did not need to internalize what parents were telling him as long as his outward persona conveyed otherwise. He felt that nine out of ten times, parents just wanted to vent, and having a board member listen to them would make them feel better. Mr. Elder stated there are “those cases where somebody has a legitimate issue that needs to be addressed.” Given his implication that a mere 10% of parents had a valid reason to express their concerns, Mr. Elder reinforced Ms. Jones’ apprehension that board members listen without hearing.

Finally, Ms. Lang described the hearing versus listening conundrum as an observable phenomenon. She consciously had made efforts to maintain eye contact and keep a positive body posture. As a speech pathologist, she said, “I understand communication. I understand the non-verbal communication. That speaks very loudly sometimes.” Mr. Elder agreed, saying, “I think we have some members who don’t use body language to the best.” The observations about external messages indicate these board members lack the understanding of what hearing means. Both Mr. Elder and Ms. Lang equated physical acts with hearing, not cognitive processes. Parents do not want to
see that they have been heard. They want to feel they have been heard, and they elaborated accordingly.

The block schedule focus group parents interpreted the board members’ outward behaviors as non-listening and non-hearing postures. One parent said, “I feel like we’re being locked out.” When asked to explain, another parent bemoaned, “They’re not listening to the majority of parents like they should be.” Interestingly, these thoughts suggest that listening is a physical act that can be swayed by numbers of participants. Beyond the volume, though, is a comprehension piece involved with hearing, so the focus group debated what hearing means. “They acknowledge that they hear us, but they’re not taking that into consideration,” and, “They’re not seeming as if they understood what we’re saying.” Parents implied that board members did not take to time to think about what parents said. Instead, the board gave lip service to hearing, which really only meant listening. Block schedule parents wanted evidence that the board truly understood their voices and considered their perspectives. Parents from BCCS expressed similar sentiments, also seeking evidence of understanding.

BCCS parents felt board members’ behaviors evidenced their lack of ability or interest in hearing what parents had to say. “You get the feeling they’re just humoring us with the twenty minutes at a meeting...It’s like a charade almost.” This sentiment appeared to parallel the block parents’ feelings about the board giving lip service—all talk and no action or understanding. One participant was particularly incensed by how board members listened to parents. “Don’t tell me or let me hear you commenting, mumbling in the background, ‘Well, we’ve dealt with them enough.’” At times, BCCS felt the board was overt in behaviors that signaled they were not interested in listening to
parents. It was frustrating for them to see board members thumbing through a book, sending text messages, and not listening. What if BCCS parents saw board members delivering direct eye contact and giving undivided attention? Would those behaviors convince them the board was hearing? As indicated earlier, board members who demonstrated attentive physical postures were not necessarily engaged in cognitive processes.

BCCS parents additionally hoped board members would listen to comments and be moved to take action. The concept of being moved connoted a normative value, an internalization that board members needed to show. Yet, BCCS parents bemoaned how parents could actually influence a decision. One BCCS parent said their group’s ideas are “never really rejected. It’s more like they just filter out of view over time.” This sentiment indicated listening without hearing had an ephemeral quality: Words could land on ears, linger, and then disappear without ever entering the brain. Another BCCS parent said he expected the board to do nothing as a result of public comment, while another remarked that, in all the years he had been speaking to the board, he just once hoped a board member would say, “You know, I haven’t heard that before...Hey, maybe this is something we, as the board, should look into.” This entire series of thoughts suggested that even if the board members listened to the parents, they failed to hear the agency parents expected of them. Within the processes of an effective deliberative democracy, hearing, then, may be a two-step process. The first step would involve cognitive processing, and the second would entail a conscious and meaningful act derived from the thought process.
Beyond thought and action, one BCCS parent felt the board had an obligation to a democratic process, an obligation that was not being met. In reference to the board listening to public comment, the parent said the board would, “listen to, or quite frankly, pretend to listen to, because it’s part of democracy to have this public comment. But a lot of times, I think they kind of have their minds made up before the meeting occurs.” This is where a BCCS parent offered a suggestion to alter the existing board processes so parents could be heard.

They [the board] have to be of the mindset, “I’m willing to hear input from staff,” and I don’t want to just hear what they’re presenting to me, but why they rejected other things....So when a parent or another community member brings an issue that says, “I don’t agree with this because....,” and the board doesn’t ever ask for the follow-up on that, that’s why these people feel marginalized....I mean, parents need to have influence on policy levels, but some of these other issues really could be discussed at the slightly lower level in the planning sessions.

This sentiment indicated how parents were looking for a space to be heard. They did not want staff presentations to dominate decision-making processes, and parents wanted to know they could present opposing viewpoints for consideration. This recommendation is just one of many ways that could create an arena for parents to be heard and to assure their participation in a deliberative democratic process.

**Conclusion to rules of engagement.**

The data from these cases indicated that the BDPS school board created rules and parents learned to how to participate within the formal rules of engagement that supported deliberative democratic practices. Parents also had to navigate informal rules. Through direct or delegated invitation, the board created processes that exhibited its desire to make collective decisions. BCCS parent leaders joined staff and the board in deliberations surrounding policy. PTA leaders facilitated deliberation among parents at a
public forum and administered a survey before returning to the board to deliberate on the appropriateness of the high school block schedule. Additionally, both sets of parents described the school board as enacting traditional and contemporary deliberative procedures. Traditional protocols were formal in nature, such as Robert’s Rules of Order, and contemporary procedures were grounded in moral principles such as respect and preparedness. Finally, school board members and parents engaged in commonly recognized deliberative practices related to accountability, publicity, and common good.

The practice of hearing versus listening was a defining normative and value-laden characteristic not explicitly discussed in the literature I reviewed, but revealed itself as a new dimension that would warrant further exploration in relation to deliberative practices.

Despite the apparent evidence of deliberative purposes, procedures, and practices, the school board and parents faced challenges in these rules of engagement. In the case of BCCS, the collective decision making could have been jeopardized by a BDPS attorney who summarily dismissed the written feedback BCCS parents had submitted. Also, the school board had to correct what charter school parents and a community member perceived as a mistake: conducting certain business outside the public eye and without input from BCCS. The school board designed and communicated formal governance procedures that were widely recognized by parents, but the board’s enactment of the rules was capricious at times. Parents could not always agree that breaking the rules was acceptable, and they even identified rules that were not always transparent. Finally, parents did not believe the board had the capacity to thoughtfully hear their concerns, and board members failed to demonstrate their understanding that the
physical act of listening needed to evolve into a cognitive hearing process that would result in an outcome reflective of the deliberations that occurred.

**Parent Roles Enacted During Deliberative Democracy**

When parents are engaged in decision-making processes, there is an implied understanding that their involvement serves a purpose, otherwise, they would not be involved. Parents generally trust in educators’ expertise, but they have increasingly challenged elected school boards and school system leaders when community sentiments are not taken into account (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2000). The resulting deliberation parents have with school system officials fosters in them a civic identity as they assume various roles (Dryzek & Hendriks, 2012). In the literature review, I explored several roles parents enact during deliberative democratic processes, including advocate, proxy agent, expert, and lobbyist. The data in the BCCS and block schedule cases demonstrate how parents and board members see these roles enacted.

In the survey I administered to the school board, members had to select a reason that best described why parents participated at public meetings. Two selected *represent a personal position*, two selected *represent a group position*, and one selected *change practices at their child’s school*. No one selected *change board policy*, nor did anyone write an alternative response. I found it interesting that four of the five respondents selected descriptors with the word *represent* instead of *change*. The data suggest board members do not believe parents come to meetings with an expectation to change board policies or practices. Perhaps board members believe they are singularly accountable for making and changing policies and practices. Alternatively, board members could be reflecting how their experiences in bringing change to the system were not influenced by
parental involvement; likewise, perhaps parents perceived their lack of influence and hold no expectations of making an impact. If board members are more likely to believe parents assume representative stances, what role do they play? The interview responses yielded four types of stances: advocate, proxy, expert, and lobbyist.

**Parent as advocate.**

As depicted through the narratives, advocacy emerged as the parents’ prominent stance. The data from all three groups – board members, BCCS parents, and block schedule parents – converged around the theme that parents played important roles as advocates. Advocacy occurred on multiple levels. Parents described how they could advocate for their own children or they could advocate for other children. Both focus groups said advocacy started on the personal level and evolved to the district level. They characterized advocacy as “hard work” that did not always result in the desired outcome. Some parents even noted their advocacy needed to extend to other county and state officials.

When parents described advocacy as a stance that evolved from individual to collective interests, they addressed a criticism of deliberative democracy. Some theorists argue that individual motivation can threaten a democratic process (Chubb & Moe, 1990a; Theiss-Morse & Hibbing, 2005); however, Mansbridge, et al. (2010) offer a perspective that validates how self-interests can transform into the common good: “Permitting self-interest reduces exploitation and obfuscation, allows information that leads to reasonable solutions and integrated outcomes, and motivates vigorous and creative deliberation” (p. 73). More simply, if self-interests are not permitted to be expressed, there is a greater likelihood that a group adopting a common good will not
consider everyone’s interests. Mansbridge, et al. believe speaking with an “I” instead of “we” personalizes the issue and helps connect divergent views. As the case study parents realized, advocacy can be situational, fluid, and transformational. Therefore, policies formed can possibly be an aggregate of all self-interests and serve a common good.

**Parent as proxy agent.**

When parents and board members talked about the collective interest that advocacy represents, they speculated that parents advocated for other parents, not just for their own interests. This suggests a proxy agency whereby parents acted on behalf of those who did not or could not act. When I asked why some parents did not advocate at the district level, board members cited time as the main factor. Ms. Hook recognized many parents do not advocate because they are so busy: “They’re feeding their families and getting ready for bed, and they’re exhausted from a busy day at work.” Mr. Elder even commented on those parents whom he sees adopt a proxy stance, stating, “You know, the ones that do attend the meetings, I don't know how they do it and have that time to come to the meetings all the time.” A block parent concurred with the sentiments expressed by board members, “I think it’s important for the parents to be heard but I think the Board has to reach out because it’s harder and harder to get parents involved now.” These sentiments first indicate the board’s acknowledgement of time as a barrier that results in proxy agency. They are sympathetic to demands parents face. Second, proxy agency is a possible response to a board that does not reach out to parents who otherwise lack the time to participate. If school boards are relying on those parents with the time to participate to represent those who do not have the time, board members may never truly know whose voices are not being heard.
In addition to time being a barrier for parent advocacy, some thought fear was a factor. Ms. Jones said parents who try to advocate at the school level for personal interests have bad experiences that discourage them from advancing concerns to the school board. She also thought nervousness stemmed from parents being intimidated by important people, like board members. Block schedule parents felt the advocacy process itself was intimidating. When I asked them what advice about advocacy they would give to parents whom they often represented, they said, “Just take a deep breath and go. You don’t have to be afraid. It’s fine.” These reflections indicate fear can be a barrier that discourages parents from participating in decision-making processes. However, with experience, some parents can overcome fear by repeatedly attending meetings.

The barriers parents experience as advocates and proxy agents are largely generated by and correctable through school board action. When a school board recognizes parents do not have time in the evening to attend a meeting, the onus is on the board to create other times and venues to engage parents. For instance, electronic social media forums can create space, accessible 24 hours a day, for parents and board members to share and deliberate multiple perspectives. Time is also measured by frequency. School boards may only raise certain topics a couple times a year, and for some parents, the unfamiliarity with board members and meeting processes is intimidating. Dryzek and Hendriks (2012) affirm this notion: “Time matters. It takes time for participants to feel at ease with and master a subject of any complexity and to realize that they can have something to say about it” (p. 40). Therefore, school boards that want to engage parents in their decision-making processes must first realize time influences the degree to which parents can participate. Also, repeated participation in a process can help a parent build
skills and confidence to overcome fears. Parents may find they no longer need to 
exercise proxy agency roles once certain barriers like time are addressed.

**Parent as expert.**

A third role parents believed they enacted was that of an expert. The case 
narratives relayed how BCCS and block schedule parents took time to research their 
topics and present facts. Both groups thought school board members did not have the 
time or resources to be fully knowledgable on all topics, a sentiment captured most 
concisely by a BCCS parent, “They can’t be experts in every area of the educational 
system.” A different BCCS parent seemed to be incensed that the board did not consider 
the BCCS parents experts on classical education.

We called up a classical charter school that’s number four in the nation and said, 
“What’s your hiring criteria?” They’re like, “Don’t value the education. Value 
the content”. We call up all these schools and they all say the same thing. Then 
we’re told in a meeting, “Well, you’ve got to do it our way.” Well, no. Seriously, 
we’re the experts on the classical charter schools.

Despite being self-described experts, the BCCS parents thought their lack of 
education credentials more easily permitted the school board to dismiss them from 
conversations about curriculum and school operations. One focus group parent said, 
“Our backgrounds don’t have certain things that they recognize; then we don’t have the 
same credibility.” A different BCCS parent further explained that the board will defer to 
staff as experts, but noted that the public is the group who brings issues to the board for 
staff to reconcile. Creating a perception of a double-standard, the board appears to trust 
that parents are knowledgeable enough about school policies and practices to bring 
concerns forward, but then disqualifies parents from a decision process if the board 
perceives better-qualified individuals are in the room.
Through their self-descriptions, parents participating in the block schedule process also acknowledged perceptions regarding credentials. When the PTA leaders held the forum for parents interested in discussing the block schedule, several parents identified themselves by job title. One said she was certificated in special education, and that made her an expert on the needs of special education children. Another said she was a psychologist, and in her expert opinion, the block schedule created difficulty for children who have anxiety or attention disorders. Parents’ comments suggested that they were knowledgeable and resourceful. They knew what to research and whom they could call. They were willing take the time to educate themselves on a matter. Parents also wanted the school board to respect their expertise, not dismiss them as having less knowledge. They also thought expertise came in the form of credentials. Parents implied their educational backgrounds and professional experiences could lend a perspective to board members who otherwise lacked knowledge in the parents’ respective fields.

**Parent as lobbyist.**

Finally, lobbyist is a parental role that was identified by one board member, Ms. Jones. She used the term “lobbying” in the context of trying to describe the work of the PTA organization. “These people are working hard for the system, and they can’t get the broad public in some cases to understand that they’re not a money maker. They’re not there to raise funds to make nice.” The literature defined lobbying as a strategy to control deliberation and influence policy, and in the process, expend billions of dollars (McGrath, 2007; Gabel & Clifford, 2011). This definition helps explain why Ms. Jones, who said she spent many years in PTA leadership, believed the public had trouble understanding the PTA’s true mission. However, I did not find any data in this study that
supported Ms. Jones’ contention that lobbying, as defined here, was occurring among BCCS and block schedule parents.

**Conclusion to parent roles.**

Parents and board members enact important roles within a deliberative framework. Regardless of the stance a parent assumes during a decision-making process, be it advocate, proxy agent, or expert, the individual should still present well-reasoned and clearly-justified positions. Those who advocate for specific issues often are well-resourced and highly competent (Dryzek & Hendriks, 2012). The BCCS parents and block schedule parents noted their resourcefulness and their expertise. Any role a parent assumes, though, would have to acknowledge a peer in the same room with the same role could have a competing perspective.

While parents need to be open to divergent views during a deliberative process, the data in this section suggest school board members, in their role as elected officials, have the responsibility to mediate pluralistic perspectives and make a judgment in consideration of what they have heard and what is in the best interest of the school system. Addressing the common good is one of the greatest implications and challenges for deliberative democratic practices. Not all parents’ advocacy for their own children will mature and transform to represent the greater good for all students in the school system. Furthermore, there is no clear definition of common good among parents and school board members. The lack of understanding of what is best for all may spur positional debate rather than deliberative discourse that is considerate of alternate viewpoints. Also, the collective decision making between school boards and parents cannot neglect staff involvement. Consequently, tensions can arise when parents who are
self-described experts encounter staff with expertise. Which set of experts has a greater likelihood of influencing a board’s policy? Is there room for both sets of experts to combine their knowledge? These are questions that need further exploration.

**Action Following Deliberative Forums**

**No decision is a decision.**

A school board can make decisions with a formal vote. It also can convey a disposition through generalized conversation that ends in a declaration. In the case of the high school block schedule, the school board made a decision to take no formal action at the moment. Yet, as the meeting minutes noted, they looked forward to staff bringing back split block and modified time models for discussion at a later date. The board described the process as moving forward, and with this declaration, made a binding decision. In this section, I will trace back to the literature on deliberative democracy showing that decisions made in deliberative forums are binding, meaning a decision made at the moment is open to change in the future.

The focus group parents, however, characterized the outcome as derailed and the issue as shelved. Although the outcome appeared nebulous to them, it indicated the availability of space to revisit the topic at another time. The concept of block scheduling was not rejected by the board, nor was it endorsed as being the only model. Rather, the derailment served as a pause until the conversation could find tracks again. As a process within a deliberative framework, policy formulation can be dynamic and recursive as it stabilizes for implementation while remaining open for continued action (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). While the board did not take formal action to vote, the issue did not die at the table. PTA presenters demonstrated a strong parent sentiment that variations on
the block schedule could benefit certain schools or students. They presented reasoned advantages and themed comments. Additionally, the process may not have resulted in a decision, but created new understandings. As a result of the deliberation, board member Ms. Jones grew to value parents as experts, a role that she earlier reserved exclusively for staff. Ms. Jones believed momentum around the block schedule conversation would continue due to the action parents took in the process.

During the deliberation, board members seemed to struggle with the notion that divergent opinions existed. Ms. Jones had initially feared that “putting a call out to all could result in multiple and unshared perspectives being publicly aired.” And as noted in the narrative, Ms. Hook did not feel the survey results were convincing even though 76% of the parents were satisfied. Additionally, the board was trying to balance a commitment to parents with a trust they held in staff. They knew that no action would fail to meet the expectations of some parents, but they lacked a compelling reason to change the high school schedule format. Their struggle is emblematic of tensions that can occur in a pluralistic society.

Political institutions that try to make democratic decisions for plural constituencies become gridlocked under the weight of their own bureaucracy because they cannot possibly meet all the presenting demands (Chubb & Moe, 1990b). Those who would want to be critical of the BDPS school board could claim gridlock in the maze of options parents saw available for a high school schedule. However, a large school system is going to be more bureaucratic because its tasks are so complex; as such, what appears as unresponsiveness is really “a sign of a responsive organization that is trying to meet environmental demands by designing new programs and policies to deal with its
problems” (Meier, Polinard, & Wrinkle, 2000, p. 591). Thus, in the case of the high school block schedule, the board’s non decision was in fact a binding decision.

*Getting to a better yes.*

The literature showed us how a fight, reframed here as deliberation, can take many forms. Processes must be in place so positions can be justified, mistakes and misunderstandings can be corrected, and mutual understanding can influence final decisions. BCCS parents in the focus group felt they did not consistently see evidence of true deliberation at work, but they gave examples of what it could look like for them. I call this *getting to a better yes* because deliberative processes do not need to have practices or outcomes that are mutually exclusive.

BCCS parents talked about the importance of the board involving parents in policy changes. They suggested the school district’s charter liaison’s job description include an expectation to have parents and the board work collaboratively. BCCS parents specifically referenced a handbook for charter applicants that could have been developed jointly. They would welcome the opportunity for the board to approach parents and say, “We are going to do a handbook and we are going to change the policy, and here’s kind of what we’re thinking. What’s your opinion...?” BCCS parents were quite firm that they did not expect the board to adopt or agree with all their recommendations. Rather, they merely wanted the opportunity to clarify their stance during a process.

BCCS parents felt they had leverage in a deliberative process because two charter schools were already operational in the district. They recommended bringing the leadership of those schools together with them and the board for discussion about charter school policy. BCCS parents gave examples of statements the board might use to show
deliberative practices at work. For instance, the board could comment on an idea brought forward by BCCS and reply, “We disagree with this one, but we’d like to know why you think it’s a good idea to….” Or the board could signify agreement saying, “We agree with you. Is this statement how we want to state it? Does that kind of coincide with what you had thought?” BCCS indicated an honest talk involving deliberative processes with relevant parties could yield mutually agreed upon policy decisions.

The key to honest talk, according to BCCS parents, was direct access to the school board. Too often, they felt like the district’s charter liaison or attorney was mediating on their behalf and trying to represent their views. They asked, “Could we just talk to the board directly?” They did not want a third party interpreting their concerns or deliberating for them. “When someone else is presenting what Brooke Classical thinks, we’re sitting there like, ‘This is not what we think. This is not how we would have said this.’” BCCS parents described the feeling as, “You’re sitting in a room. You’re negotiating with an entity, but you’re never actually allowed to discuss.” Parents then felt compelled to reach out to board members “off camera” to let them know the real story. In their experiences, board members appreciated hearing their honest viewpoints directly.

BCCS believed the third party representation served to soften the direct and sometimes alternate viewpoints they held. “People have a different comfort level with discussing education and expressing alternative viewpoints to whatever might be the status quo.” BCCS parents felt they were not ones to shy away from deliberation and debate. They believed such dialogue, even with tension, could strengthen an organization. “And there goes the great public debate. That’s what makes our country so
wonderful. The goal isn’t to create hostility. It’s to make things better. It’s only when there’s tension is anything improved.” Overall, the parents wanted to be on parallel tracks with the school board without fighting or engendering antagonism. What they valued most, though, would be their ability to self-represent their views. This deliberative practice would help them meet the goal of getting to a better yes.

Conclusion to action.

Deliberative democracy aims to create outcomes that are binding yet open to revision. In each case presented in this section, the core deliberative tenets were evident. The school board made a decision about the block schedule and overtly stated its intent to revisit the model with expanded options. The board’s decision occurred despite the struggle they had meeting multiple perspectives. The pause in action served to give them and staff more time to explore various opportunities. The BCCS case also demonstrated binding principles. Getting to a better yes meant engaging in recursive processes to improve policies and practices. The BCCS parents welcomed tension associated with diverse perspectives. They wished for more collaborative forums that would allow them to self-represent. In conclusion, the deliberative practices enacted in both cases led to binding outcomes.

Conclusion to Thematic Analysis Findings

When I reflect on the narratives, I realize how democracy and deliberation play subtle yet powerful roles in the relationship between school boards and parents. If parents have a democratic wish to participate in democratic processes, school boards have the responsibility to devise the purposes, procedures, and practices that facilitate
parent involvement. Furthermore, the board’s rules of engagement need to create a space for parents to have a role.

I found that the school board’s narrative relayed how its members desired to involve parents in deliberative decision-making processes. The school board explicitly extended invitations to specific parent groups. It first appeared as if the board generated interest in the topics. Upon closer examination, I realized the desire was driven by constituency demand. In the case of BCCS, three board members who campaigned on a slate were instrumental in bringing the charter school parents’ application back for reconsideration. BCCS proponents supported the slate during the election process, hoping they could garner board support with their elected candidates, and they, in fact, received the newly elected board members’ endorsement. Parents participated in a democratic election process and reaped the benefits of public officials representing their interests. Likewise, the school board’s constituency directed its interest in high school block schedules. Driven by a handful of board members who wished to be responsive to community concerns they were hearing, the high school block schedule constituency was not as sharply defined as the BCCS parents. Nevertheless, board members still felt compelled to fulfill the democratic ideal of representation. Deliberative democracy is a practice that addresses issues that are of interest to the public, and in these two cases, I found the board was responsive to its public’s interests. Not only was the board responsive, it wished to arrive at collective decisions by inviting parents to the table to deliberate over charter school policy and block schedule models.

While the board’s narrative supported the representative and collective tenets characteristic of deliberative democracy, the parents’ narratives exhibited how meeting
formalities created a “messy” space for democracy. The BCCS parents stated their
ingressions on the need for waiver requests, but they had difficulty understanding the board’s rationale
for denying them. They passionately implored the board to give reasons, but the board
president rebuffed their request and told them to go back and watch the video tape to hear
the board’s reasons for denial. BCCS parents later complained that Robert’s Rules of
Order were broken. I found it ironic that a group of parents who wanted informal chats
with the board were critical of the same board that abandoned formalities during a
meeting. The block schedule parents did not have passionate exchanges with the board.
Rather, they were well-reasoned and methodical with their deliberation. Yet, they also
felt frustrated with a school board that appeared to make a vague decision. The block
schedule parents thought the topic had derailed. Unfortunately, they did not recognize
the binding nature of the deliberative democratic process in which they had engaged.

Perhaps the process was messy for both parent groups because they did not
experience deliberation with a unified board. The BCCS parent group and block
schedule parent group came with respective like-minded interests. However, they were
deliberating with a seven-member board that did not have a unanimous position. This
dynamic made it difficult for the parent groups to “read” the board. The deliberative
process did not collapse, but it was substantially weakened. All perspectives need to be
shared during a deliberative democratic process, and when the board’s perspectives were
nebulous, parent participants were left wondering about board member rationales. Both
parent groups characterized themselves as persistent and not easily daunted; however,
other parent groups may not have the same tenacity. A messy deliberative outcome
might discourage less-resolute parents from coming forward. But the aim of deliberative
democracy is not to create consensus or unified outcomes. Rather, the governing board’s processes and the participants’ values influence the deliberative practices that provide opportunities for multiple voices to express their views.

The school board’s and parents’ experiences, as told through their narratives, helped shape the findings in my thematic analysis. I learned how the school board’s purposes, procedures, and practices constructed a deliberative frame that engaged parents in decision-making processes. I was surprised to find how similarly board members and parents defined and described the participatory stances parents assumed. They used similar words such as advocate and expert to define parents’ roles at meetings. Even though they did not use the term proxy agent, parents and board members articulated a common understanding of those parents who stand in place of other parents who do not have the time or confidence to address a school board. Finally, the outcomes BCCS and block parents experienced were indicative of how deliberative democratic processes result in binding decisions that are recursive and open to change.

When I reflect across the themes, my greatest finding is how deliberative democracy has affective and cognitive domains that can satisfy the plurality of ideas that arise. I liken this finding to Bachtinger, Niemeyer, Neblo, Steenbergen, and Steiner’s (2010) conception of Type I and Type II deliberative democracy. Type I focuses on rational discourse and process. Critics say it can stifle creativity and place a cognitive burden. This is where Type II deliberation, which relies on alternative communication, defined here as affective domain, can balance the traditional and sometimes constrictive Type I approaches.
I draw on my thematic analysis for several examples of cognitive domains associated with deliberative democracy. First, the Habermasian proceduralists rely on specifically defined protocols during deliberative processes. Such structure and adherence to rules aligns with cognitive processes. Robert’s Rules of Order and timed speaking blocks found at BDPS school board meetings need little interpretation because the governing parameters are clearly defined. Second, practices that hold decision-making authorities accountable are cognitive. When the school board met in private about charter policy and did not consider input from charter school parents, the community held the board accountable and demanded transparency. Parents were able to rationalize why they thought the board violated fundamental democratic principles. Third, parents defined hearing as a type of cognition. They said listening was a physical act that did not equate to hearing. Parents believed board members could demonstrate that they heard parent voices if they could share what they thought or take action. Fourth, the expert stance parents assumed falls into a cognitive realm. Parents from both case studies prided themselves on their intellectual acumen, their ability to research issues, and their ability to make well-reasoned arguments. Finally, binding decisions that define deliberative outcomes follow cognitive lines of thought. Decision-makers must justify their positions with the understanding that the outcome is subject to review and change. The school board revisited several decisions with BCCS: the denial of the first application, the waivers that were granted, and the terms of the lease agreement. The board members also promised the block schedule parents they would consider hybrid models for the high school schedules in the future. Each of these examples demonstrates the organizing, intellectualizing, and justifying that are inherent to cognitive processes.
The affective domain is evident first in the public-spirited purpose of deliberative democracy. The public becomes engaged when matters important to them arise. They have a “wish” to participate in a process. Granted, the wish is not altruistic since it is focused on sentimental interest, but as was mentioned earlier in the literature, an individual feeling can lead to an aggregate decision. I saw this happen particularly in the block schedule parent forum where parents advocated first for options that touched their own children and then agreed to support findings regarding a hybrid model. Second, contemporary deliberative democratic procedures are affective because they incorporate moral authority. I found school board members and parents valued respect and preparedness. These hidden rules of engagement emerged from the feelings meeting participants experienced. Third, the practice of believing in a common purpose also touches on the affective domain because it is an ideal. Even though board members and parents wanted to make decisions in the best interest of students, they could not clearly articulate what “best interest” meant. Ideals, by nature, are intangibles that satisfy emotional needs. Finally, I believe the proxy agent stance is a derivative of the affective domain. Parents who serve as proxies feel that they are performing a service to parents who are disadvantaged. Both the BCCS and block schedule parents believed they gave voice to parents who could not attend board meetings. In a way, they were performing a community service that made them feel like they were serving a greater purpose beyond their personal stance. Each of these examples demonstrates the manner in which an individual has an affective connection with a deliberative democratic purpose, procedure, practice, or role.
Because deliberative democracy encompasses affective and cognitive domains, it becomes a viable platform for any school board who wishes to engage parents in a decision-making process. Some parents have strong-held moral values and feel emotionally connected to issues that impact their children. Others want to feel grounded in well-defined meeting protocols and practices. A school board that recognizes both types of parents can develop deliberative purposes, procedures, and practices that will have a greater opportunity to reach across the diverse viewpoints and create a broader understanding among all stakeholders.
Chapter Six

Deliberative Democratic Practices: Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to explore how an elected school board engaged its students’ parents in the local decision-making processes. I aimed to bring forward important aspects of a school board’s policies and practices that involved parents in system-level decisions. Also, I examined the participatory stances parents assumed during public deliberation with the school board. It was hoped that a better understanding of deliberative democratic practices would provide insight about how a school board could create space to engage parents in meaningful two-way exchanges which include varied perspectives.

The findings as presented in Chapters 4 and 5 through narratives and thematic analysis suggested promise for deliberative democracy. I saw several things happen that contributed to deliberative practices. Overall, the findings suggested that the school board created public meeting parameters with clear logistics. Board members and parents demonstrated strong alignment in their understanding of the stances parents adopted as they participated in decision-making processes. Also, parents responded positively to the school board’s invitation to participate in a process. Finally, when the school board directly engaged the two parent groups in decision-making processes, deliberative democratic purposes, procedures, practices, and outcomes were apparent.

However, there were factors that limited a fully-realized deliberative democracy. For instance, the board’s practices of engaging parents in deliberation varied, ranging from direct involvement with BCCS parents to delegated authority, via the PTA, with the block schedule parents. And even though deliberative democracy was a framework with
observable tenets, the school board was not aware of these practices; as such, it was not intentionally enacting them. Additionally, there was tension between the board’s adopted formal practices and desired informal practices by the board and parents. This tension exemplified how perceived bureaucratic gridlock could bump up against deliberative processes. Despite these challenges, the board’s actions were not gridlock; in contrast, its decisions were binding, and the board did not relinquish its responsibility to make judgments.

The purpose of this chapter is to more thoroughly synthesize the relationship between school boards, parents, and deliberative democratic practices. I make holistic connections across the case studies that extend the Chapter 5 conversation beyond the analytical findings. I organize the connections under three headings: selective homogeneity, watchdog parents, and local space. As I discuss the connections in relation to the literature, I present limitations and implications for school boards, parents, and deliberative democratic theory. At times, ideas in the discussion depart from the literature, and at other times they expand upon the literature. Finally, I make recommendations for further research.

Limitations

Selective homogeneity.

I examined the parameters and practices an elected school board established to engage parents in the decision-making processes. In the BCCS and high school block schedule cases, I found evidence of deliberative democratic tenets in the board’s rules of engagement. What I found most remarkable in the ten months of attending school board meetings was that these cases were the only instances where school board members
invited parents to deliberate with them over policy and practice. This made me wonder why the school board selected particular topics in which to engage parents. I also looked at which parents were being invited to the decision-making table. My observations led me to believe the rules of engagement for BDPS school board were selective, and the exclusivity resulted in homogeneity of topics and parent participants.

The school board and parents indicated through survey and interview responses that parents could influence board policies most often in the areas of budget and curriculum. Yet, neither charter school policy nor high school scheduling fell into these categories. These topics were selected by the board and initiated with a select group of parents. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2003) might describe this as “stealth democracy” at work, the notion that citizens do not want to be involved in democratic practices until necessary. However, rather than parents suddenly appearing on the radar to demand deliberation, it was the school board that raised the issues and explicitly issued invitations. The board’s actions suggest a broadening of the theory of stealth democracy to encompass selective decisions by elected bodies that decide when they want to enact deliberative democracy.

The board’s selectiveness was not limited to the topical what. It was also limited to whom. When Brooke District Public Schools had an appointed school board, I experienced how board members had a greater allegiance to staff than to the broader community. They trusted in the trained professionals to make decisions that were in the best interest of the school system. With the advent of an elected school board in 2000, the allegiance shifted to the constituency. Glass (2008) found that coalitions will elect boards and expect a return on the investment. The slate of board members, Mr. Elder, Mr.
Kindle, and Dr. Reever, acknowledged they had been supported by charter school proponents, and they reversed the previous school board’s decision to deny the BCCS application. The BCCS parents netted a desirable outcome from their political support. In the other case study, the board wanted to hear from parents about the high school block schedule. The parents selected to spearhead the charge were county level PTA leaders. The PTA is a coalition that leverages political and social capital in the community. It has instant credibility as the “voice” of parents. Representing over 20,000 households, the PTA leaders get a return on investment each time the board turns to them. The board did not actively invite parents opposed to charter schools to discuss the charter school policy nor did it question why only PTA executive officers conducted research and presented recommendation about high school schedules. The board selected elite and influential leaders whom they perceived to have a vested interest in a topic, and in doing so, reinforced the expectations of the select coalitions.

The board’s selectiveness of what would rise to a decision-making process and who would participate in the decision making resulted in selective homogeneity that threatened deliberative democracy. I define selective homogeneity as follows: a unity of purpose, practice, or demographic that is destructive to a process. Gutmann and Thompson (2004) believe deliberative democratic processes best address the moral disagreement in politics because “citizens are more likely to take a broader view of issues in a process in which moral reasons are traded than in a process in which political power is the only currency” (p. 11). Upon close examination of the two case studies, BCCS parents were united in their cause, and they deliberated with board members, both exchanging reasons for their respective positions. But the board was not facilitating
deliberation between charter school proponents and oppositionists. The board’s decision making was relative to a single position being held by BCCS parents. And, as noted in earlier findings with the high school block schedule parents, the board opted to pursue a hybrid schedule, which really was a consensus model. Therefore, the two cases demonstrated homogenous positions that did more to threaten deliberative democratic practice than advance it.

On the surface, the parents’ unification and consensus on the select issues would appear benign to the overall decision-making process of the school board. After all, no other parents outside the BCCS and PTA leaders were offering different viewpoints. This lack of disagreement, though, is what threatens deliberative democracy. Theiss-Morse and Hibbing (2005) warn that homogenous groups can be conflict-free and send a message that conflict is bad. Parents can disengage, the default mode becomes consensus, and in turn, devolves into what I believe is a selective homogeneity that undermines democracy. I was waiting to hear counter-positions from other parents sectors, but they never came forward. In the past, I had heard parents concerned about draining funds from other public schools speak out against charter schools at board meetings. Yet, no one approached the board and requested that it deny the BCCS charter or its waiver requests. At the block schedule parent forum and in the PTA’s survey, there were clear parent factions, but no one ever spoke to the board publicly. My perception is that most parents were disengaged from issues that they did not deem to be urgently important to the school district, and this retreat weakened the possibility of a more robust deliberative democratic forum.
Implications for school boards.

The discussion thus far in this section would at first suggest that a school board’s selectiveness about the decision-making issues it makes available to parents automatically leads to a malignant homogeneity that is detrimental to deliberative practices. In these two cases, I believe there is evidence to support such a claim. If school boards are truly interested in deliberating with broad constituency, they will have to first focus on the purpose of any deliberative model they devise. Rather than aggregating individual preferences into collective ones, which is what the BDPS school board wanted to do when they heard the results of the PTA’s block schedule survey, school boards should embrace processes that prioritize deliberating about preferences (List & Sliwka, 2011). Likewise, if they should invite a variety of parents to the table to avoid selecting groups with a homogenous voice. School boards need to create venues that invite and encourage parents with different preferences to deliberations where they can justify their views and listen to others.

Beyond reevaluating purpose as one of the rules of engagement, school boards could also consider how to devise public-spirited meeting agendas free of “stealth” topics that are generated outside of demonstrated public interest. I mentioned in the introduction to this study how federal and state mandates in public education are removing decision-making authority at the local level, and those responsible for the legislation are invisible to local school boards (Goodlad, 2008). There are enough stealth bombers outside of local airspace circling public education policy. Elected school boards can be powerful and relevant decision-making bodies if they capitalize on local interests. They can do this by working with parents to remove the invisible cloak from
policymaking. Not only can purpose, processes, and practices be jointly defined as rules of engagement, so can the topics. School boards will need to become comfortable creating space for topics that generate multiple perspectives rather than devising agendas with homogenous issues, accompanied by homogenous parent interests, that make decision making perfunctory and harmful to the advancement of deliberative democracy.

**Implications for parents.**

The case studies demonstrated how some rules of engagement were hidden. In particular, board member Ms. Jones thought parents should be organized when they decide to engage in conversation with the board. Both focus groups most likely would describe the deliberation with the school board as organized. The BCCS parents discussed how they were strategic (i.e., selective) about which parent representatives would address the board. And block schedule PTA leaders prided themselves on the rational and research-backed presentation they gave to the board. Both sets of parents were being selective as they mobilized their efforts into homogenous messages that could influence the school board. While the parents saw strength in a unified position, backed by carefully-developed justifications, they were actually creating a one-dimensional argument that resulted in malignant homogeneity.

Had other community opponents or inquirers surfaced at board meetings to challenge the BCCS or block schedule parents, deliberation based on reason-giving may have faltered and given way to self-serving argument. While it may be prudent for parents to be organized and well-prepared when they engage in decision-making processes with a school board, they may have to be prepared for the possibility that deliberation will not be limited to board members. They may have to consider the views
of other parents not part of their homogenous group. Furthermore, as in the BCCS case study when the school system attorney marginalized parent feedback, parents will need to be prepared also to engage with staff during deliberative decision-making processes. Thus, organization as hidden rule of engagement should not be defined as mobilization around a homogenous topic or perspective. Parents who believe one voice bolsters a deliberative position will need to be open to other voices that will give strength to a deliberative process.

*Implications for deliberative democracy.*

This study explored how an elected school board engaged parents in decision-making processes within a deliberative framework. The assumption I made was that deliberation would occur between the school board and parents, with the school board inviting parents to processes initiated by board members. I had not considered if an initiated forum guaranteed a commitment to outcomes. Nor was I aware of the following criticism offered by Dryzek and Hendriks (2012): “The history of invited spaces is littered with ultimately meaningless or symbolic consultation exercises, conducted solely to buy some time, to divert critics, or to co-opt potential troublemakers” (p. 46). My assumption led me to focus on two case studies that had invitational agendas driven by the school board rather than agendas jointly created with parents. Perhaps the board’s proprietary selectiveness of topics and participants stemmed from its control of the agenda. The board members, as I, believed they were fulfilling the parents’ democratic wish to be involved in a process, but that process was distilled into a homogeneity that did not fully realize the power of deliberative democracy.
Selectiveness of purpose and participants, resulting in homogeneity, causes tension for deliberative democratic theory. If parents are truly reciprocal partners in deliberative processes with school boards, “they should be treated as political agents who take part in governance, directly or through their accountable representatives, by presenting and responding to reasons that would justify the laws under which they must live together” (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, pp. 166-17). Tensions emerge when school boards have to share the political agency as part of their duty during a public meeting, while still engaging in a deliberative process. Those seeking effective deliberative democracy must recognize that the accountable political agents, such as school boards that encourage and then participate in deliberation with parents, cannot effectively facilitate a process that would enable a variety of perspectives to come forward. Kowalski (2008) suggests effective deliberative democratic practices use direct intervention that moderates discussions for school improvement. In other words, deliberative processes should be facilitated, and a school board who is interested in deliberation with parents cannot be so selective about its processes and participants. Otherwise, there is a danger the perspectives will be forced to converge and homogenize, resulting in a malignancy that weakens the complexity and fullness of the deliberation. Deliberative democracy will need to mitigate the tension that occurs when a policy-making school board seeks to simultaneously create and govern its own rules of engagement.

**Conclusions about selective homogeneity.**

Deliberative democracy is a framework with tenets related to purpose, procedure, and practice. Whether rules for engagement are formal or informal, transparent or
hidden, they must create the conditions for deliberative processes to be as diverse as possible. If school boards or parents alone carry the onus of determining which agendas rise to the level of joint decision making, and with whom, they may unintentionally endanger deliberation with malignant selectiveness. School boards will need to capitalize on building local interests that are not vulnerable to stealth forces circling at the state and federal levels. The local interests will need to appeal to broad parent sectors that will benefit from hearing each other’s perspectives. Parents, in turn, will need to prepare deliberative platforms that are multidimensional so they can address more than the viewpoints they anticipate a school board will offer. Finally, deliberative democratic theorists will have to consider how shared political agency requires facilitation among all participants, including the elected representatives who wish to engage in deliberation.

**Watchdog parents.**

Thematic analysis in Chapter 4 focused on ideas shared by school board members and focus group parents related to the participatory stances assumed by parents during decision-making processes. Upon closer examination, I realize how the stances merely suggested how the parents were “appearing.” Parents in this study were advocates who first championed causes for their own children; then, through a transformative process, their advocacy matured into broader purposes that they say served the best interest of all students. School board members, BCCS parents, and block schedule parents all saw the appearance of proxy agency, even though they did not use that term. They believed there were certain parents who did not have the time or ability to deliberate with the board, so other parent leaders took up the cause. Finally, parents in the two case studies appeared as experts who had researched their topics. They did not expect the school board to have
the time to become all-knowing, so they prided themselves on being able to have information ready to share. Digging deeper into the appearances, I have concluded that the stances were really roles parents used as vehicles to be watchdogs over the school board.

Watchdog is defined here as a parent who: 1) is alert to the politics of the school board and 2) seeks justice as a guardian of the constituency that elected the school board members. A block schedule parent said she was an advocate because school board members “need to remember that they need to touch back on the people that they’re representing.” This suggests she is watching out for a constituency that she believes should be connected to the school board. A BCCS parent did not think the school board shared accurate information with the public about charter school policy: “So we begin to have to correct misnomers and that type of thing for the Board members. It’s really an opportunity to educate the Board members and the public, right?” This suggested the parent believed she has to be vigilant about the school board’s veracity in order to guard the public against potential injustice as a result of misinformation.

It is important to remember that one of the primary aims of deliberative democracy is to provide a process for justification. The outcome is not irrelevant, but it is not the guiding purpose. Therefore, parents who use their advocacy, proxy, and expert stances to focus on outcomes that provide justice for a disconnected or misinformed constituency are weakening deliberation. Gutmann and Thompson (2004) argue that deliberative democratic processes can have unjust outcomes. Certainly, the BCCS parents at the contentious March 2012 meeting felt an injustice had been done. They wanted to know what their appeal rights were and they cried out to specific board
members they saw as supporters. They felt the school board had applied a lease term to BCCS that had not been imposed on an earlier charter school. Even the board president Ms. Hook felt the school board had let the BCCS parents down. However, BCCS parents did not raise concerns about the process in which they were engaged. They were seated at the decision-making table with staff. They had participated in previous school board meetings to inform the district’s charter school policy. BCCS parents were able to justify their position to the board. Their best attempts to advocate for their school were really thinly veiled attempts to seek justice they felt was owed to them, perhaps for electing the slate. As watchdogs, the BCCS parents understood the political maneuverings of the board and saw themselves protecting the charter school community writ large against an unjust school board.

**Implications for school boards.**

When school boards engage parents in decision-making processes at the district level, their first assumption is that parents are advocating either for their own children or for the best interest of all children. However, advocacy is actually a stance parents are adopting to hold school board members accountable to the constituency. Accountability is a tenet of deliberative democracy. But the kind of accountability that state and federal laws attach to student achievement standards is not the accountability the public wants (Mathews, 2008). Parents are vigilantly watching school boards to make sure the decisions being made for the school district reach back and touch the voting constituency with accurate information and just rationale.

School boards will need to carefully communicate the difference between their decision-making processes and the outcomes at which they arrive. Watchdog parents
seeking “just” outcomes instead of “just” processes may force school boards into making more decisions behind closed doors; consequently, school boards that retreat into private chambers will eliminate the opportunity for deliberation. Even if the processes are just and factual information is considered, school boards could still arrive at the wrong decision. School boards will have to be willing to revisit their decisions. Additionally, the deliberation that would occur between school boards and parents may help highlight areas where the process is not just. Thus, school boards need to understand how the opportunities they create for advocacy will give rise to watchdog parents who will hold board members accountable to the constituency.

**Implications for parents.**

Watchdog parents who want to hold school boards accountable while guarding the constituency could be charged to step back and honestly evaluate whose interests they are safeguarding. First, do parents know who comprises the represented constituency? School board members are elected by the public at large. There is no tally that shows which board members were elected by which parents in the school system. Second, parents who advocate or serve in proxy roles rarely are appointed. They self-select, believing they are performing a common good. When participants in deliberative forums self-select, they typically are highly knowledgeable, competent, and well resourced (Dryzek & Hendriks, 2012). Their watch may unintentionally represent only constituents of the same ilk, creating what appears to be unequal representation.

I noticed demographic inequalities in both case studies. The racial representation of participants in this study was the starkest demographic. All board members and all parents who participated in the focus groups were White. All parents cited in this study
who spoke at public comment were White. In a school system with nearly one-third of its population minority, there was gross underrepresentation of any non-White constituent. Of all the individual adults captured in this study, nearly 70% were female. Due to privacy concerns, I did not collect the financial status of the parents and board members, but I suspect they did not reflect the nearly 25% of the BDPS student population that is eligible to receive free and reduced price meals. From these statistics, the assumption is that White middle-class females comprised the representative constituency being guarded by watchdog parents. Armed with this information, some parents may infer that advocates who are participating in deliberative forums should be mindful of how they equally represent the demographics of the school district. According to deliberative theory, however, this assumption would be incorrect.

Most notions of equality in a democracy focus on the representation of participants. Social scientists look at how citizens are fairly represented in relation to factors such as race, ethnicity, wealth, cultural capital, and social capital. Most deliberative democratic theories depart from these traditional beliefs. Deliberation is a communicative process focused on representing ideas and justification, not on representing people (Chappell, 2012; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; List & Sliwka, 2011). Chappell explains the juxtaposition of equality and inclusion as follows:

The requirements of inclusion and equality together make deliberation democratic. Equality ensures that each citizen has the right, either formal or substantive, to speak and be heard by others. Inclusion ensures that citizens have the opportunity to make use of these rights in practice. (p. 73)

The implication, then, for watchdog parents is that they guard and protect the processes that allow for other interested parents to share their viewpoints. Then, only
those parents who are interested in the topics at hand need to participate in deliberative forums. The PTA leaders in the block schedule focus group enacted this premise when they held their forum for parents. They created a space for participation, guidelines for engagement, and an environment that invited participation. The PTA leaders adopted advocacy and proxy stances as they represented their findings to the school board, but their true roles were as watchdogs in a deliberative democratic process.

**Implications for deliberative democracy.**

The tension that exists in deliberative democracy between representative processes and representative people reminds me of the procedural versus substantive conflict argued by Gutmann and Thompson (2004) and Bachtinger, et al. (2010). Deliberative practices that ignore the values people bring to the conversation result in stifled forums that have an overreliance on procedures. Yet, effective deliberations with free and open exchanges among participants cannot occur without purpose and structure: “The theory of deliberative democracy has to balance the sometimes contradictory requirements of the politics of presence and the politics of the best argument” (Chappell, 2012, p. 72). Watchdog parents, as defined in this discussion, are aware of school board politics and guard the constituency they believe they represent. Thus, the implication for deliberative democratic theory is to recognize how watchdog parents in a school system are at the intersection between representative processes and representative people.

**Conclusions about watchdog parents.**

The discussion in this section suggests school board members as elected representatives and parent advocates as watchdogs need to work in concert to create deliberative democratic processes that provide opportunities for inclusion and equality as
related to the expression of ideas. Accountability is measured against the processes of
deliberation, not the outcomes or in the completeness of demographic representation.
School boards or parents who would try to gather deliberative participants as statistical
representatives of the aggregate may only succeed in forcing a forum that is not inspired
or genuine, belying an aim of deliberative democracy to balance presence and argument.

The importance of local space.

Given the increasing state and federal demands on public education, school
boards will need to work with parents to identify arenas that are still available to local
discretion. Local is important. Otherwise, parents may retreat from district-level
decision making, and school boards may become meaningless conduits for external
legislation. Both case studies demonstrated how the BDPS school board created
deliberative forums and took local action on matters that were not tied to state and federal
mandates.

For instance, local school boards are able to decide how to organize the
instructional day for students. I confirmed this when I presented at the September 2011
public meeting the variety of scheduling models used by other district’s high schools
throughout the state. The BDPS school board could have used the external localities as
reference points for their decision about which model to use. Instead, board members
wanted to go deeper internally to hear from their own parents. With this move,
“localness” extended to a micro level beneath the board’s governance, resulting in
parents being part of a deliberative decision-making process. The school board’s
subsequent binding action to explore hybrid models did not need the blessing of state
officials, nor was it bound to federal mandates. A space was discovered for local decisions.

The BCCS case study had the potential to be mired in state statute. However, BCCS parents focused on the portion of BDPS policy 440 that permitted the local authority to waive policies, regulations, and statutes that could pose a barrier to the charter school accomplishing its goals. At its June 2012 meeting, the school board did exercise its local decision-making power by granting two of the three BCCS waiver requests. Findings indicated the charter school parents were able to get to a better yes with the school board because they leveraged deliberation at the local level. They even thought about ways to improve communication with the board: recommending a local handbook, suggesting continued collaboration with other local district charter schools, and emphasizing the importance of direct access to local school board members. As Tracy (2010) pointed out, and the BCCS parents suggested, “localness” carries an expectation that school boards will be accessible and responsive.

School boards can fulfill this expectation if they identify for parents local arenas that are available for deliberative decision making. The narratives in Chapter 4 revealed the BDPS board felt it could be responsive on the local level where curriculum matters were concerned. Ironically, with the advent of Common Core State Standards, curriculum guidelines and the accompanying assessments are now among the most highly regulated aspects of public education. If the BDPS school board felt parents could have space to participate in curriculum decisions, does this mean public education authority is shared along a local, state, and federal continuum? If so, Moe (2000) argues, then local control is little more than a ruse:
The locals are actually worse off, however, than even this [local, state, national] three-way split suggests, for they are at the bottom of the hierarchy. Unless state constitutions give them a measure of autonomy, they are simply creatures of the state governance: their structure, powers, and responsibilities are subject to determination by state officials, and they must follow whatever policies, rules, and regulations are imposed on them by the state. (p. 132)

This is a dismal view of how policies are structured in a tiered hierarchy as opposed to being along a continuum of decision-making locales. However, depending where local systems are on the chain, the key is not to solve the problems state and federal policies create; rather, school districts need to make the policies work for them (F. Hess, personal communication, July 11, 2011).

Within the context of the local, state, and federal continuum, the BCCS parents and the BDPS school board found a way to make local work for them. Realizing the benefit of Moe’s desire that states give a measure of autonomy, the school board exercised its right as permitted in state stature to grant waivers to BCCS. The path to get there was contentious at times, but it demonstrated the value of a deliberative forum that permitted all parties involved to state perspectives, give rationale, and make collective decisions in a local process.

**Implications for school boards.**

The discussion in this section underscores the need for school boards to carefully navigate state and federal rules to find and preserve space for local decision making. School boards will need to recognize that localness, as influenced by external rules, cannot stand alone: “As the rules are explained by federal officials to state program coordinators and then to local officials, the requirements and restrictions can make the messy middle look like an impenetrable wall” (Hess, 2013). The middle is messy
because policies lay out requirements, what has to be done, and restrictions, what is not allowed to be done. School boards are left with the challenging work to interpret what can be done locally.

School boards hesitant to tackle the nebulous gray areas will merely stick to business that is “safe” to conduct on the local level. The high school block schedule is an example of such. Whether the board decided to abandon the block model or retain it, no existing legislation would have been able to sanction or otherwise interfere with the board’s decision. Even though the school board was safe from external intrusion, the internal accountability to parents was still a factor. Therefore, school boards that try to play it safe with federal and state authorities will need to recognize local interests place just as great an onus on them.

School boards that do not mind democratic messiness may find liberation within the autonomous space carved into state and federal requirements. Recent school reform efforts have yielded “directed autonomy” where broad goals set by the state provide leeway for local school boards (Kowalski, 2008). Charter schools are an outgrowth of school reform movements, and each state has different statutes governing charter policy. The BCCS parents were well-versed in state law and sought to enact local policy that allowed qualified exemptions to statutes. The middle first became messy when no one could point to any law that restricted the number of years to grant an initial charter. BCCS parents knew they were placing the school board in a position of deciding what it could do, as opposed to what it had to do or was not allowed to do. A lesson learned from this case study is that local decision making, especially precedent-setting, can be difficult for a school board that is used to looking to external sources to justify its
decisions. Parents are relying on school boards to take advantage of the open middle ground created by state and federal legislation. They want to know that their locally elected representatives are accessible and responsive to local deliberations. In turn, school boards may find it liberating—or terrifying—to find places where directed autonomy gives them an opportunity to exercise local control.

**Implications for parents.**

If local is important, what does local mean to a parent? My child? My family? My school? My school district? It can mean all of these at different times depending on issue and context. BDPS school board member Ms. Hook and parents from both focus groups agreed that parents’ interests often started with their own children. Through a transformed advocacy, these parents came to engage the local school board with a broader focus on the greater good of doing what was in the best interest of children. Parents who take advantage of opportunities to deliberate with a school board will be more likely to make the transformation from individual interests to community ones:

We grasp that we’re not putting some ‘selfish me’ aside in favor of family or neighborhood or country, but we are incorporating a sense of who we are as “me’s” into the greater sense of family, neighborhood, and country. Deliberation is how we figure out the difference between what I want and what the community that I belong to needs.... Deliberation is how we go from the sphere of my interests to the more encompassing sphere of our interests—even the “public interest.” It is how we move from the private to the public, from the individual to the individual-embedded-in-the-community. (Barber, 2011, p. 65)

Educators are accustomed to hearing parents say, “I don’t care about the other children. I care about my child.” Educators also know that children, while individually unique, find community in schools. They associate with grade levels, school clubs, and athletic teams, and the school itself. Parents who advocate for their children at the school
level demonstrate how they have already transferred their understanding of localness from the home to the school. Therefore, “my child” is now part of the collective “our children.”

Once parents see their children as part of a broader community of learners, they are positioned to make the transformation to school district decision-making arenas. The parent who is interested in starting a charter school to meet her child’s interests knows she cannot have a public school that will serve one student. She will seek other parents who have similar interests for their children. Such was the circumstance for BCCS parents who advocated for their school to be approved for a group of students. A local community was forming, growing from my to our. BCCS parents even pointed out how their new school would make the district stronger. Had they not been able to deliberate with a local school board that had the authority to grant a charter, BCCS parents may not have fully experienced the power and importance of localness.

Once school boards navigate state and federal mandates and create space for local decision making, parents can use the space to find interests that serve the greater good for a community of learners. They will not have to sacrifice the interests of their individual children in the wake of external regulations that dictate what must be done. Parents will be able to work with their local school boards through deliberative forums and explore what can be done for their children.

**Implications for deliberative democracy.**

Localness in this discussion has emerged as a space that school boards and parents can find to deliberate about local decisions that are not constrained by state and federal mandates. This space is important to deliberative democratic practice because
localness carries weight in any process where various viewpoints are discussed by interested parties. Local players have local knowledge, local energy, and local commitment that contribute to collective problem-solving. Therefore, deliberative democratic processes may be most successful at the local level.

Localness connotes a space that is small, not on a national platform. When deliberations take place in small venues with small institutions, such as elected school boards, they are known as micro deliberative forums (Chappell, 2012). Micro forums are also apt to have fewer participants. Dryzek & Hendriks (2012) referenced research that suggested face-to-face deliberation should not occur in groups larger than 20 people. When the BCCS parents deliberated with the local school board, the greatest amount of participants at one time was 15. The block schedule parents’ deliberation included 11 participants. Smaller platforms gave more time and opportunity for parents and the school board to deliberate their views.

Despite the opportunities for prolonged and specific discussion, micro deliberative democracy situated in localness could be criticized for being exclusionary and limiting space. The BCCS and block schedule case studies demonstrated deliberation that occurred among a small group of people with parents who were selected by the school board to come to the forum. Could the limitations of space and participants contribute to the preservation of self-interests? It is possible, but would the contrary, inviting all district parents to the conversation, yield better processes and outcomes? Gutmann and Thompson (2004), citing an earlier work of theirs, would argue that expanding the scope of deliberative forums would not be an advantage: “Decision-making by the direct assembly of all citizens may not yield either the best laws and public
policies or the best deliberative justifications for those laws and public policies” (p. 31). Therefore, micro deliberative forums that invest in local participants who have the most interest in the local issue may create the best space for deliberative democracy.

**Conclusions about local space.**

State and federal mandates impact public education policymaking. Parents and school boards are left wondering if there is space left for local decisions. The case studies demonstrated two arenas where space was available: charter school policy and high school schedule models. There are many more areas that school boards and parents could open to deliberative democratic forums that lead to collective decision making. The challenge will be to find space in external policies or to create new local policies. In order to enable a school district to make decisions that benefit a common good, parents will need to continually expand their interests beyond their individual children. The resulting deliberation will occur in a micro environment between an elected body and interested parents. The local venue provides those with the most local interest and local knowledge to create a space for deliberations that can focus on what can be done, not what must or cannot be done as prescribed by state and federal mandates.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

This discussion has raised important issues regarding the selectiveness, watchfulness, and localness of deliberative democratic processes enacted between an elected school board and its parents. Effective processes and practices can lead to collective decision making and ward off selective homogeneity that can cripple deliberation. While procedural and implementation components are central to deliberative democracy, so are the people who keep a watchful eye on the authorities who
are most accountable to meeting the expectations of the collective decisions. Because people are core to deliberation, those who are local, closest to the issues, can bring about the biggest change during an era of increasing state and federal controls. As I reflect on the conclusions of this study, I realize there are many areas that raise more questions about how school boards engage parents in decision-making processes. Therefore, in this section, I discuss other areas of research that could broaden the understanding of school boards and parents deliberating on issues that impact the district.

First, I noticed how often school board members and parents discussed the desire to sit and chat informally about issues that were important to parents and the district. There was a heavy emphasis on traditional face-to-face interaction. Given the participatory time barriers often cited, I wondered how electronic media could rectify logistical limitations and support deliberative principles. From simple email exchange to live-feed Twitter chats, could school board members demonstrate their commitment to being accessible to the public and open to hearing parent perspectives? Online forums could also be studied for their capacity to shift the knowledge paradigm. Currently, school board meetings occur at a designated place and time for people who can present whatever proprietary knowledge they have at the time. Electronic forums can create collaborative communities that build knowledge and understanding over a period of time. Therefore, there is a possibility that alternatives to face-to-face deliberation could legitimize collective decision making and still allow school boards and parents to be mutually respectful and engage in reciprocity.

Second, deliberative democracy theory is steeped in procedures and reason-giving. Some theorists suggest values and affective domains can complement traditional
philosophies. I suggest more study be done specifically on emotions displayed during a deliberative process. The BCCS parents pled desperately to be heard. They showed frustration and exasperation with the school board. On the other hand, the block schedule parents prided themselves on being objective and not attached to any one recommendation. When comparing the two, board member Ms. Lang said she did not think the block schedule parents had as much influence over her decision because they lacked emotion. Somehow, “non-rational” reactions had greater sway than reason-giving, a core tenet of deliberative democracy.

Third, another area to be researched is the tension elected school boards must feel when they are elected individually but must act collectively. It appears school board members deliberate individually among themselves and with parents, but once a decision is made, they make a commitment to uphold the decision as a collective unit despite their individual differences. Parents, too, feel the tension because they do not know for sure with whom they are deliberating – the individuals or the joint group. Parents know the final decision is often made by a board vote, so when parents are deliberating with the board, are they really concentrating on getting “board” approval, or are parents deliberating with individual members whom they believe will come together for the collective majority vote? Could there be micro deliberations occurring within a school board’s micro deliberative forum?

Fourth and finally, I believe further studies could investigate how school boards that wish to engage parents in a deliberative democratic process could unite against the external forces such as No Child Left Behind instead of deliberating within the spaces they can find in federal mandates. As I discussed how spaces could be created for school
boards and parents to deliberate, I realized those spaces were being created within existing paradigms. Could school boards and parents use deliberative processes to arrive at a collective decision to disrupt the existing framework? Rather than trying to find a crowded space for local autonomy, school boards and parents may seek to reclaim their ground. Just recently, several states have withdrawn their participation in Race to the Top and Common Core State Standards cooperatives. Did these movements occur as the result of local school districts and their parents joining together in a united front, and if so, did they use deliberative processes to arrive at their decision?

**Conclusion**

The case studies demonstrated how an elected school board engaged parents in the decision-making processes using deliberative democratic practices. Despite the increasing federal involvement in public education, the BDPS school board found space for parents to influence its decisions. Within that space, the board created parameters that guided the deliberation. In most cases, core tenets of deliberative democracy were evident; however, both topics and participants were limited, calling into question how representative a school board’s decision-making process could be. Parents assumed various stances during the deliberations: advocate, proxy agent, and expert. Upon closer examination, these stances actually became a vehicle for parents to adopt a role as watchdogs who wanted to hold the school board accountable for its actions. Finally, the decisions made by the board and parents demonstrated characteristics of outcomes desired in deliberative democratic practices. Decisions were collective, binding, and better-affirmed.
Important issues were raised regarding the processes, roles, and outcomes of the school board’s deliberative processes. How can board meeting agendas appeal to parents in the district? A board that raises topics that are of interest only to its own members, or only represent external mandates, does not create an opportunity for parents to participate in decision making. Parents who are involved in district-level processes certainly advocate for children, their parents, and enlighten the board; however, as savvy participants who have taken time to learn the political landscape and want to hold elected officials accountable, they serve a far larger role. Interestingly, the accountability for deliberative democracy is not tied to the desires, representativeness, or plurality of the constituency. Instead, elected officials are responsible for creating the processes and enacting the practices that allow those interested in deliberation to justify their positions and to do so in a public manner. The combination of elected officials and interested participants shows the importance of locality in deliberative processes. Involving more people with more opinions in venues beyond local districts is not a test that deliberative democracy must pass.

Through these processes, roles, and outcomes, some deliberative democratic goals were met better than others. For instance, parents conducted research and consulted with various experts, making their positions well-reasoned. The board, with its invitational stance, was non-coercive and legitimized the notion that collective decisions could be made. The decisions were arrived at in a public manner and they were binding. However, a major weakness occurred with the selective homogeneity that ensued: there was limited opportunity for participants with divergent viewpoints to exercise how they could be other-regarding, a valued component characteristic of deliberative democracy.
Quite simply, the board did not have to weigh multiple voices with its own views. True reciprocity among diverse community voices was never fully realized. Additionally, the board and parents never clearly defined for whom the common good served. The common interest held within each case study seemed to be the guiding force as opposed to a broader understanding of how a collective good for the district’s students was being served.

In respect to the aforementioned deliberative democratic aims, I am left with a few questions specific to the participants in this study. What if the board had not invited parents to a deliberative process? What would the process have looked like? Would the outcomes have been the same? Based on the traditional organization of school board meetings, I anticipate parent input would have been limited to one-way communication delivered for three minutes via microphone in the opening minutes of a board meeting. The board would have politely thanked the parents and then resumed conversation among themselves and staff. The BCCS parents would have had to rely on the “slate” board members to grant their waivers, and as the deliberations revealed, the slate was in the minority at the beginning of the process. The motions to approve waivers most likely would have died on the floor. In the other case study, block schedule parents would have never been part of any decision-making equation. The presentation I delivered in the fall of 2011 would have served as the sole source of information for the board’s consideration.

The fact that the information I presented to the board would be the primary influence on their decision is one that two years ago would have given me a great source of pride. I researched the topic far and wide across the state. I read literature on best
practices for high school schedules. The superintendent approved my report. In short, I was the resident expert on staff. When I heard the board members express an interest in getting parent input, I was offended. What would the parents know that I did not? Did parents have experience serving as a high school principal, as I did? I now understand that the board needed to hear other voices to make a decision. I represented staff, only one of the many constituencies that could bring a perspective to the school board. The board did not dismiss my research, as I first thought. They needed to hear the parents’ viewpoint – the authentic experiences parents felt their children were having in the current block schedule model.

It was this experience that led to me to want to understand why a board would engage parents in a decision-making process. Similarly, I wanted to see the evolution of the process and its outcome. I was fascinated that a school board would break from traditional protocol and have parents at the table to deliberate with them. I learned how the board could make better-informed decisions when they included parents in a deliberative process. The board felt more confident about its decisions, and parents felt valued with the direct access they had to the board. I learned that state and federal mandates did not unnecessarily constrain local decision making for school boards. More importantly, I learned that a school board can create a stronger local organization when it looks beyond its own voice and that of staff to include parent perspectives and enact deliberative processes that make parents active participants in decisions the board makes.
It is important to note here how my positionality in the district underwent transition during the course of this study. The transformation of job duties opened new opportunities for me to draw on what I had learned throughout my research process. When the study began in the fall of 2011, I was the associate superintendent of secondary schools. I had served in the district for 25 years and enjoyed a collegial relationship with the school board. This meant that in recent years as a central office leader, I had developed trust with most members and felt comfortable calling them individually or meeting them for lunch to discuss mutual interests for the district. Also, I had co-chaired for five years the district’s Family-School Partnership committee with the PTA executive council president mentioned in the block schedule case study. This committee started as a grassroots movement to address school-based concerns parents had. However, we evolved to address systemic issues such as customer service in front offices and how parents could utilize online grade reporting software. Knowing that the board had a vested interest in meeting parent involvement expectations, combined with the growing desire parent leaders were exhibiting to have greater impact on systemic issues, I developed an inquiry stance that guided my research as a practitioner in the district. Ultimately, the relationships I built served me well when the superintendent announced in the spring of 2012 that I would be appointed as the Chief Operating Officer for the school system.

The new role brought a different purview of responsibility, which included overseeing the communications and fiscal services departments. Before the conclusion of this study, I was already applying what I had learned in the previous months while
conducting my study. In response to board and parent interests regarding parent engagement in decision-making processes, I re-envisioned the communications department and had an opportunity to hire a talented new director to bring that vision to reality. Rather than continue with a traditional press secretary stance that delivered information in a push-out model, the repurposed department was charged with community engagement and marketing with a pull-in emphasis. Also, the executive director of fiscal services worked with me to create a more consumer-friendly approach to communicating and building the school system’s $500 million budget. We started with the premise that the budget would be an ongoing conversation with the community, not a one-time event. Additionally, we wanted to support the board’s interest in soliciting parent input throughout the decision-making process.

Armed with literature and research on deliberative democracy, along with education brand management and constituency segmentation theories shared by instructor Nick Morgan in the Penn Graduate School of Education Mid-Career Program, I enthusiastically moved forward with fresh ideas for key departments in the district, and I capitalized on interests the school board expressed to engage parents in decision-making processes. Among the first projects assigned to the communications director was a high school building renovation project. This was not any high school- it was the first in the district, the heart of the desegregation movement, and an iconic building that held a treasured place in the center of the city. The school board felt the community would want to be involved in the feasibility study, so staff was tasked with designing a process that would engage parents. A series of meetings were held in community venues, and the staff’s steering committee meetings were open to the public. This approach was a first
for BDPS, and it jettisoned the process into an accountable and public realm characteristic of deliberative democratic practice. The community was sharply divided about how the school could be relocated on the site, but eventually came to a recommendation that they felt was in the common good of students, taxpayers, and neighboring residents. The process allowed divergent views to be expressed in a public manner, and as parents and community members considered each other’s standpoints, they demonstrated reciprocity. In addition to parents and community members engaging in 16 public meetings, communications staff launched social media via Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. After nearly four months, staff delivered the final feasibility report that reflected a recommendation arrived at with the community. Parents told the board members how important the process was. They felt valued and believed they had arrived at a better outcome than what staff or the board would have alone. The board was so pleased that one member privately commented to me, “This is great! We don’t even have to worry about making a decision. The parents made it for us.”

Relative to the budget, the executive director of fiscal services worked with the communications director to develop a rally campaign that would launch the proposed budget within the context of the promise of public education in our district. Again, parents and community members were invited to a series of structured forums to give their viewpoints about priorities that the superintendent’s proposed budget needed to target. Social media was used here, just as with the high school project. From these town hall meetings and electronic platforms, a budget was developed that resonated with the community’s identified priorities. The community was influential enough to stave off cuts to freshman athletics and keep magnet programs intact. Moreover, the board’s
requested budget was nearly $15 million above what local government officials said they would approve. I believe the community’s engagement in the process created a compelling case for the board to seek above the minimum maintenance of effort budget required by legislation. Hundreds of voices came forward and the board truly had to wrestle with pluralistic views before arriving at its final budget recommendation. As of the publication date of this document, the board had requested a series of workshops for parents to further assist with aligning budget requests with systemic goals in the event that local government officials would not allocate the requested funds.

Both of these more recent examples of parent engagement in my district reveal a continued and sincere interest of our district’s school board to engage parents in systemic decision-making processes. However, the board still struggles with the meaning of deliberative democracy and how to accomplish it. For instance, one board member believes parent engagement in our district has turned into “community organizing” akin to awareness campaigns such as a walk for cancer. She wants to return to traditional public hearings, believing a parent who spends a few minutes at a microphone is engaged in a deliberative process. The majority of board members, though, are appreciating the creative and new approaches to parent engagement being implemented with my vision, guidance, and support to key staff. Yet, at times, I get the impression board members are still not willing to change their practices directly. Instead, they remain comfortable, as they did with the block schedule parents in this study, delegating the deliberative process to staff with the hope that consensus is brought before them. Also, the board continues to appear capricious with its selection of parent engagement opportunities that rise above
the stealth radar. These challenges are consistent with many of the limitations to deliberative democracy discussed in Chapter 6.

Despite the existing tension, I am pleased to see how the school board in general has broadened its understanding of parent engagement and has started to change practice by suggesting spaces for deliberative democracy. There has been a residual benefit of the superintendent and executive staff rethinking how they normally support the board and relay information to, and solicit ideas from, the district’s constituency. I remain optimistic that the school board and the district’s parents will continue to grow together and jointly identify topics, processes, and values that lend themselves to deliberative democracy. The anticipated result will be a strengthened local space that thrives despite the perceived intrusion of state and federal mandates.
APPENDIX A

Concept Map for School Boards Engaging Parents in Policy Making

Deliberative Democracy

Parent Stances
- Advocate
- Proxy
- Expert

School Board Processes
School Board Practices
Participants' Values

District Policies
District Practices

Implementation of policy and practice
# APPENDIX B

## Research Questions Aligned to Data Collection Instruments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Rationale for question</th>
<th>Data that will answer question</th>
<th>Interview/focus group questions</th>
<th>Online survey questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What are the parameters and practices an elected school board establishes for parental participation in decision-making processes?</td>
<td>To describe the school board philosophy and mechanisms established for parental participation.</td>
<td>Board member interviews, parent focus groups, online survey, archival documents, field observation.</td>
<td>Parent Focus Group 4(a), 4(b)</td>
<td>Board Survey Questions: 6, 7, 8, 9, 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To assess the clarity and specificity of how parents can participate in the board’s decision-making processes.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Parent Focus Group 3(a), 3(b), 4, 6, 9, 10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Board Member Interview 1, 1(a), 1(b), 2(c), 3, 4, 5, 6.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Board Member Interview 2, 2(a), 2(b), 3(a), 3(b), 4, 5, 6.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What participatory stances do parents take as they participate in decision-making processes?</td>
<td>To delineate various roles assumed by parents during decision-making processes as perceived by board members and parents.</td>
<td>Board member interviews, parent focus groups, online survey.</td>
<td>Parent Focus Group 7</td>
<td>Board Survey Questions: 4, 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Board Member Interview 1(c)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How do decision-making processes enacted between the school board and parents demonstrate tenets of deliberative democracy?</td>
<td>To frame purposes, procedures, practices, roles, and outcomes of decision-making processes.</td>
<td>Board member interviews, parent focus groups, archival documents, field observation.</td>
<td>Parent Focus Group 1(a), 1(b), 1(c), 3(a), 3(b), 4, 5, 6  Board Member Interview 1(b), 3(a), 3(b)</td>
<td>Board Survey Questions: 3, 7, 8, 10, 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX C

Board of Education Public Meeting Observation Protocol

Date of observation: ________________________________

Researcher: _______________________________________

Parent speaker observed: _____________________________

Topic for speaker: __________________________________

Participatory stance evident: _________________________

☐ URL Link to access video/audio recording
☐ Laptop
☐ Copy of Public Comment Sign Up Sheet

Observation Fieldnotes:

- Note what parameters are set by the board for public comment
- Cite evidence of parameters being followed
- Following public comments, take fieldnotes on computer of comments made by the board that incorporate/address parent comments
- Categorize the stance
- Record any direct interaction that occurs between a board member and a parent speaker during the public comment session

Post-observation:

- Record contact info from comment sheets for use in online survey instrument invitation
- Clean up fieldnotes
- Review recording of public commentary proceeding and corresponding relevant board dialogue
- Get public commentary transcribed
- Get approved minutes from this meeting at next board meeting
- Code notes
- Save all notes and documents in password protected laptop in BOE Meeting Observation file
- Jot reflections in research journal in password protected laptop in Research Journal file
APPENDIX D

Parent Engagement Board Survey

Q1 Informed Consent

Introduction: This study attempts to collect information about how a school board engages parents in policymaking during public meetings. It is being conducted by Ann Bonitatibus, a doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education. Confidentiality: All data obtained from participants will be kept confidential and will only be reported in an aggregate format (by reporting only combined results and never reporting individual ones). All questionnaires will be concealed, and no one other than Ann Bonitatibus will have access to them. Results are confidential and will be used only for research purposes. The data collected will be stored in the Qualtrics-secure database until it has been deleted by Ann Bonitatibus.

Q2 I understand that participation in this survey is voluntary.

- I agree to participate in this survey (1)
- I decline to participate in this survey (2)

Q3 Which statement best describes the reason you ran for election to the Board of Education of XXXX?

- To fix a particular issue(s) (1)
- To perform a civic duty (2)
- To represent parent interests (3)
- To ensure the schools are the best they can be (4)

Q4 Which reason best describes why parents participate at public meetings?

- Change board policy (1)
- Change practices at their child’s school (2)
- Represent their personal position (3)
- Represent a group position (4)

Q5 How often do parents take on the following roles when they speak at public meetings
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Often (1)</th>
<th>Sometimes (2)</th>
<th>Rarely (3)</th>
<th>Never (4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advocate for a particular issue (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adviser to inform the board (2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision-making partner (3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocate for a particular group (4)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocate for an individual child’s issue (5)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q6 How urgent are each one of the following issues for the Board of Education of XXXX right now?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Extremely Urgent (1)</th>
<th>Moderately Urgent (2)</th>
<th>Somewhat Urgent (3)</th>
<th>Not at all Urgent (4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Balanced Budget (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of school staff (2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline or school safety (3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent engagement in decision-making (4)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closing the achievement gap among subgroups (5)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school block schedule (6)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for charter schools (7)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (8)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Q7 To what degree is each one of the following a barrier for the Board of Education of XXXX to make decisions about policy?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strong Barrier (1)</th>
<th>Moderate Barrier (2)</th>
<th>Minimal Barrier (3)</th>
<th>Not a Barrier (4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Child Left Behind (1)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMAR mandates (2)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective bargaining agreements with employee associations (3)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental expectations to be involved in board decisions (4)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Apathy (5)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local parameters and structures for policymaking (6)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (7)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q8 For each of the following statements about decisions being made at the local level, please indicate your level of agreement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree (1)</th>
<th>Agree (2)</th>
<th>Disagree (3)</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree (4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There is excessive pressure to meet federal and state mandates. This has resulted in the loss of control at the local level. (1)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent involvement in policy-making at the district level is crucial. (2)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents of students in XXXX know how to influence the</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There are clear policies that direct parents on how they can participate in the local board's decision-making processes. (4)

It is important that democratic processes occur for parents to participate in decisions the board makes. (5)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>local board's policies. (3)</th>
<th>Budget (1)</th>
<th>Curriculum (2)</th>
<th>Facilities (3)</th>
<th>School operations (4)</th>
<th>Other (5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q9 Please rank in order (with 1 being the highest and 4 being the lowest) the areas where parents have the greatest ability at the local level to influence policy decisions made by the board.

_____ Budget (1)
_____ Curriculum (2)
_____ Facilities (3)
_____ School operations (4)
_____ Other (5)
Q10 As you are making policy decisions, how important is each of the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Extremely important (1)</th>
<th>Moderately important (2)</th>
<th>Somewhat important (3)</th>
<th>Not important (4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questioning the way things have traditionally been done (1)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening to opinions opposite of your own (2)</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allowing parents to deliberate with you (3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraging diverse views to come forward (4)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unifying your beliefs with that of parents (5)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q11 Which statement best describes how parent input should influence policy decisions the board makes?

- Parents should be full partners in the decision process and should vote on policy. (1)
- Parents should be full partners in the decision process but should not vote on policy. (2)
- Parents should be asked for their opinions throughout a decision process. (3)
- Parents should be consulted once the decision process has recommendations for consideration. (4)
- Parents should not be consulted in a decision process. (5)

**NOTE:** Items 1, 4, 5 adapted from survey questions found in the following source:

APPENDIX E

Parent Focus Group Interview Protocol

Thank you for meeting with me today and agreeing to a focus group interview. Because this is a study and I am associated with a university, there is a consent form for you to sign.

The interview is confidential, meaning your name or other personal identifying information will not be used in any reports. You will notice it is being taped. If at any point you would like me to turn it off, I will do so. This is for my purpose so I can accurately capture all your responses.

I am interested in seeing how a diverse public school system like ours involves parents in local decision-making processes, particularly in light of the fact that state and federal mandates such as No Child Left Behind are influencing policies on the local level. I want to learn more about how a board of education’s policies and practices engage parents in decisions about local policy. This study will help inform our school board and parents on practices that engage parents in policy-making processes.

I will ask about a dozen questions that fall into three main topics: what practices might the board of education use to engage you in decisions, in what areas are you involved in decisions, and how you are engaged in decision-making processes. I may ask follow-up questions, but the entire interview should take no more than 60 minutes.

1. Think about the recent topic you represented on high school block scheduling / charter school approval.
   a. Describe what motivated you to participate in this topic.
   b. What did you think the experience would be like? Why?
   c. Describe what the climate was like for you to speak.

2. Prior to your participation, what do you think the school board believed about parents speaking at its public meetings?
   a. How do you feel you were treated? Explain.
   b. Did your experience match what you believed ahead of time? Give an example.

3. What rules did you think were in place for you to speak at the meeting?
   a. Explain how you knew the rules.
b. Were the rules followed? How or how not?

4. Does the board make it clear that parents can participate in decision-making processes?
   a. Explain how the board does or does not do this.
   b. How did you learn about the processes?

5. How do you think the board of education takes into account what you say as they make their decisions? Give an example

6. What were the processes you noticed our board of education using to engage you in decision-making?
   a. Do you think those processes are effective? Why or why not?

7. Describe the role you think you had when you participated in public meetings.
   a. Explain your reason for participating in the process.

8. In which area or areas of local school system decision-making do you think you have influence other than the topic you represented?
   a. Why do you think you might have influence in this area or areas?
   b. Are there areas of local school system decision-making where you do not feel you have much influence? If so, why do you think you do not have influence in this area?
   c. What are some factors that might get in the way of you being able to have influence on local decisions being made?

9. If you could give advice to our board regarding what to communicate to parents about being involved in their policy-making processes, what would that be?

10. If you could give advice to parents who wish to speak in front of the board, what would that be?

11. Is there anything else you would like to add on this topic of parents participating at public school board meetings?

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me and share your thoughts about how our board of education engages you in policy-making processes.
APPENDIX F

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1. Think about the recent topic you represented on high school block scheduling / charter school approval.
   a. Describe what motivated you to participate in this topic.
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2. Prior to your participation, what do you think the school board believed about parents speaking at its public meetings?
   a. How do you feel you were treated? Explain.
   b. Did your experience match what you believed ahead of time? Give an example.

3. What rules did you think were in place for you to speak at the meeting?
   a. Explain how you knew the rules.
b. Were the rules followed? How or how not?

4. Does the board make it clear that parents can participate in decision-making processes?
   a. Explain how the board does or does not do this.
   b. How did you learn about the processes?

5. How do you think the board of education takes into account what you say as they make their decisions? Give an example

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11. Is there anything else you would like to add on this topic of parents participating at public school board meetings?

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me and share your thoughts about how our board of education engages you in policy-making processes.
APPENDIX G

University of Pennsylvania
Interview/Focus Group Research Consent Form

Protocol Title: Parents and Democracy in Public Education Policymaking
Principal Investigator: Eva Gold, Adjunct Professor, in the Associated Faculty, of the Graduate School of Education; Contact Information: XXXX
Study Contact: Ann Bonitatibus, doctoral student; Contact Information: XXXX

You are being invited to participate in a research study.

Before you agree, please be aware of the following:

- The purpose of this study, being completed for a dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania, is to examine a school board's deliberative democratic processes and the parents' participatory stance during public meetings as policies are established or modified. The outcome is to inform school boards, policymakers, parents, and other educational leaders which stances parents can take during deliberative processes.
- This study will take place from September 2011 through June 2012 and will involve approximately 30 participants in various focus groups and related surveys and interviews.
- You are being asked to participate in this study because you have participated in a school board meeting involving interactions between the board and parents.
- The interview/focus group session should last no longer than 90 minutes for one session.
- There are no risks for you associated in this study, nor will there be any benefit you gain from participating in the study. However, your participation can help us understand how parent participation during public school board meetings influences policies.
- You have the option of declining to be in this study or leaving it at any time and there will be no negative consequences.
- Only I will be able to use the information you provide for this study, and it will only be used for research purposes.
- The interviews/focus group conversation will be audiotaped and transcribed with a confidential and secure service, transcribeitquick.com. Once the transcription occurs, the audiotape will be destroyed. Your names will not be used in the study. All data will be stored in a password protected computer to which only I have access.
- The study will maintain the privacy of all participants. Actual names and references to the school system will remain anonymous through the use of pseudonyms.
- Please be aware that I want to keep focus group sessions as confidential as possible, so I ask that you not use anything directly identifying you, such as your
name, when you talk about your personal experiences. I also ask that you not
discuss other participants’ responses outside this discussion. However, because
this is in a group setting, the other individuals participating will know your
responses and I ask that you not discuss your responses outside the focus group,
but I cannot guarantee that will not happen.

If you have questions about your participation in this research study or about your rights
as a research participant, please make sure to discuss them with me or the principal
investigator. You may also call the Office of Regulatory Affairs at the University of
Pennsylvania at (215) 898-2614 to talk about your rights as a research subject.

You are being asked to sign this form to show that
  • The research study and the information above have been discussed with you
  • You agree to participate in the study
You will receive a copy of this signed form and the summary of the study that will be
discussed with you.

______________________  ____________________  ____________
Subject’s Name (print)   Subject’s Signature   Date

______________________  ____________________  ____________
Witness (print)          Witness’ Signature   Date
References


Erickson, F. (1986). Qualitative methods in research on teaching. In M. Wittrock (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching (3rd edition)* (pp. 119-161). New York, NY: Macmillan.


