

POLICY BRIEF

KEY FINDINGS

> **A majority of board members view their board positively.** Seventy-three percent said their board's performance was "good" or "excellent."

> **Board members are most concerned about mental health, staffing, and behavior issues.**

> **Lack of program funding, academic challenges, and building conditions** were also top concerns.

> Board members are **least concerned about controversial curriculum, activism, financial transparency, and internet access.**

> **Liberal and conservative board members are polarized on "culture war" issues.**



MAINE SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER SURVEY

INTRODUCTION

School boards in Maine have a great deal of control over the education students in their district receive. Most decisions affecting students' education, such as the curriculum they will be taught, the textbooks they will use, and the professional development their teachers receive, are made by the board. Additionally, they write the district's budget, hire and direct the superintendent, and address local concerns related to school safety, academic performance, and student well-being.

Today, Maine schools confront new challenges, such as teacher shortages, declining standardized test scores, and rising student mental health and behavioral issues. At the same time, politically charged culture war issues garner significant media attention and inspire activism on both the left and right. How school boards navigate these issues, and which issues they prioritize, will shape the future of education in the state.

To better understand how Maine's school board members perceive their boards' operations and which education issues concern them most, Maine Policy Institute conducted this survey. The results reflect the perspectives of those directly responsible for shaping local education policy, highlighting the strengths of local boards and the significant challenges districts face today.

METHODOLOGY

The names and email addresses of 1,034 Maine school board members were gathered from district websites. Then, those board members were emailed a link to the survey three

times: first on June 10, then on June 19, and finally on July 12. Nine hundred thirty-three board members received the survey email, while 101 did not due to those emails bouncing. Two hundred seventeen of the 933 who received the email took the survey, resulting in a 23 percent response rate. Survey participation was voluntary, and respondents were not required to answer all questions, so the number of respondents (N) for each question is provided in the results.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Age: Forty-four percent of school board members were 65 years or older. By contrast, just 2 percent of board members were between ages 18 and 34. More than half fell between 35 and 64, with 16 percent aged 35-44, 21 percent aged 45-54, and 16 percent aged 55-64. (N=141)

Sex: Forty-three percent were male, and 57 percent were female. (N=139)

Ideology: Twenty-nine percent of respondents identified as liberal, 32 percent as moderate, 34 percent as conservative, and 4 percent as "other." (N=137)

Political Party: Thirty-nine percent identified as Democrats, 23 percent as Independents, 31 percent as Republicans, and 7 percent as "other." (N=133)

Experience: Twelve percent had accumulated less than one year of experience on school boards. Forty-nine percent had 1-4 years of experience, 23 percent had 5-10 years of experience, and 15 percent had more than ten years of experience. (N=217)

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SCHOOL BOARD OPERATIONS

PERFORMANCE

A majority of school board members had positive views of their board's performance. Figure 1 shows that 73 percent described their board's performance as "good" or "excellent," while just 10 percent said their board was "poor" or "very poor."

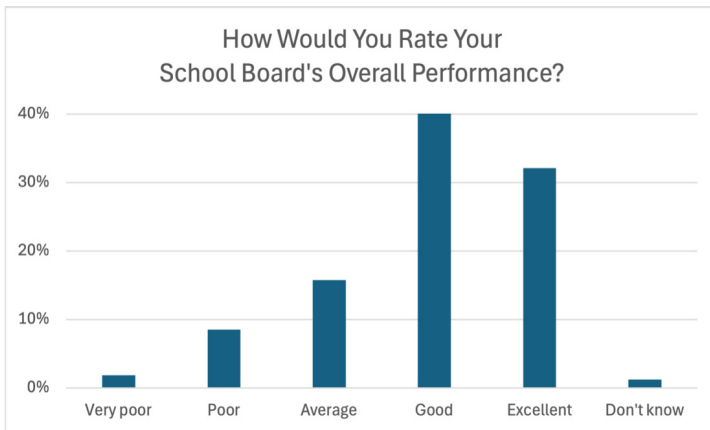


Figure 1. N=165.

BEST PRACTICES

Figure 2 shows that more than 70 percent of board members said their board engages in five school board "best practices" outlined in Maine Policy Institute's school board model policies. Notably, almost one-quarter of respondents said their board was directed by the superintendent rather than the board directing the superintendent as legally mandated.

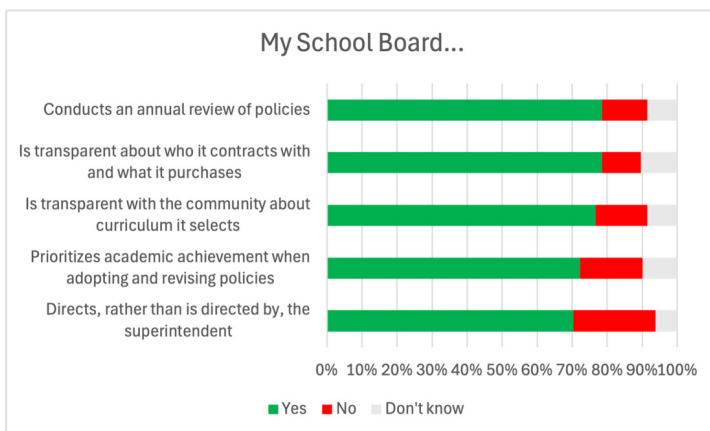


Figure 2. N=163.

DECISIONS

Figure 3 shows that 80 percent of board members said their board makes decisions that are good for students and focused on local issues. Sixty-eight percent said board decisions aligned with their values and addressed problems effectively.

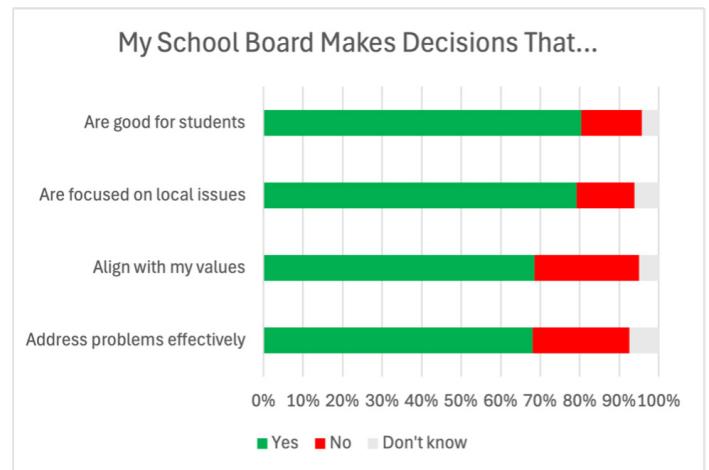


Figure 3. N=164.

EXPERT OPINIONS AND GUIDANCE

As seen in Figure 4, board members said they were most likely to go to the superintendent's office (64 percent) and the school board chairperson (60 percent) when seeking answers about board operations and policies. Over one-third of respondents also said they go to the Maine School Management Association, the Maine School Board Association, other board members, or their school board attorney for guidance on board matters.

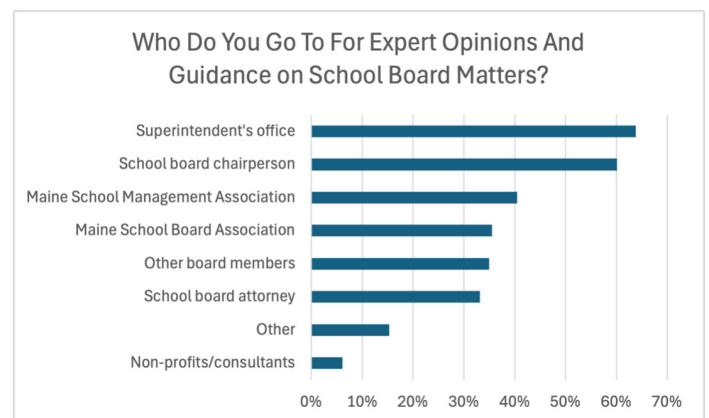


Figure 4. N=163.

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SUPPORTS AND RESOURCES

Figure 5 shows that when asked what supports and resources would help them improve as board members, the most popular choice (65 percent) was information sessions on relevant topics (i.e., curriculum, budgeting, and behavior), followed by Parliamentary Procedure training (47 percent).

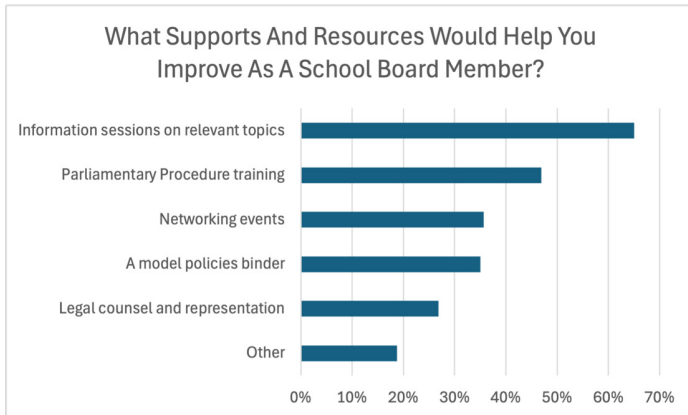


Figure 5. N=160.

PARLIAMENTARY PROCEDURE

Figure 6 shows that 56 percent of board members felt comfortable or very comfortable navigating Parliamentary Procedure (Robert's Rules of Order), which they must know to conduct meetings and maintain order effectively. Just 10 percent reported feeling uncomfortable or very uncomfortable with these rules.

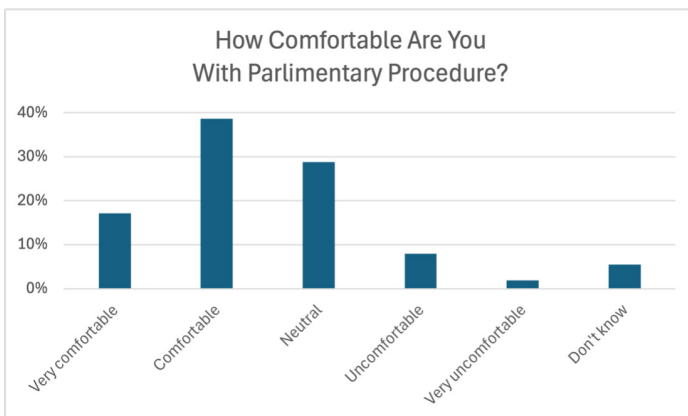


Figure 6. N=163.

DISTRICT ISSUES

School board members were asked to rate how concerned they were about 40 education issues in their district. These issues covered academics, finances, infrastructure, staffing, mental health, behavior, disability, activism, gender and sexuality, and diversity, equity, and inclusion. Figure 7 shows the complete list of responses, ordered by the percentage of board members who said they were "concerned" or "somewhat concerned."

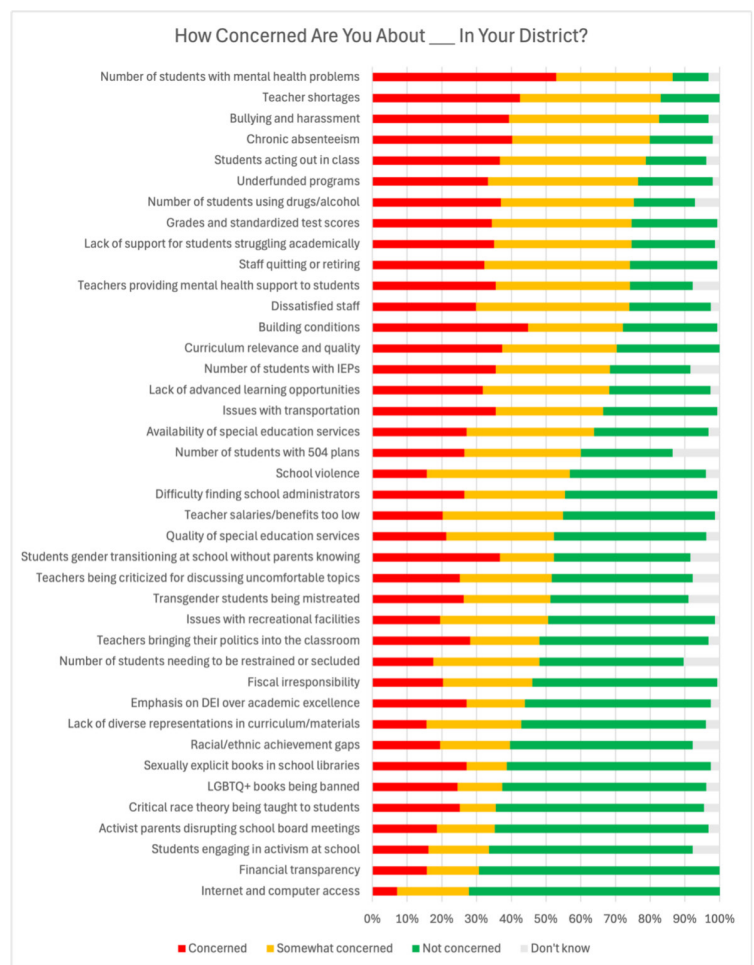


Figure 7. N=153 to 156 depending on the issue.

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TOP ISSUES

Issues that concerned or somewhat concerned 70 percent or more board members are labeled below as “top issues,” while those that concerned or somewhat concerned 40 percent or less are labeled below as “minor issues.” As Figure 8 shows, board members’ greatest concerns were with mental health, staffing, and behavior. Eighty-six percent expressed concern about the number of students with mental health problems, 83 percent about teacher shortages, and the same percentage about bullying and harassment. Eighty percent expressed concern about the number of students with mental health problems, 83 percent about teacher shortages, and the same percentage about bullying and harassment. Eighty percent said they were worried about chronic absenteeism, and 79 percent about students acting out in class. Underfunded programs (76 percent), academic issues, ranging from grades and test scores to lack of support for students struggling academically (75 percent), and building conditions (72 percent) were also top concerns.

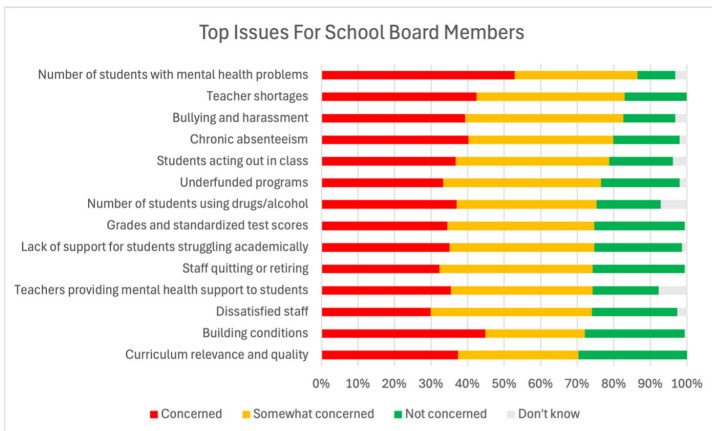


Figure 8. N=163. Shows issues that concerned or somewhat concerned 70 percent or more. N=153 to 156 depending on the issue.

MINOR ISSUES

Figure 9 shows that of the 40 issues presented, board members were least concerned about racial and ethnic achievement gaps, controversial books and curriculum, activism from students or parents, financial transparency, and internet and computer access. Just 39 percent expressed concerns about LGBTQ+ books being banned, while a near identical percentage (38 percent) expressed concern about sexually explicit books in school libraries. Critical race theory being taught to students worried just 36 percent of board members, while activist parents

disrupting school board meetings and students engaging in activism at school troubled 34 and 35 percent respectively. Thirty-one percent expressed concern about financial transparency, and a mere 28 percent about internet and computer access.

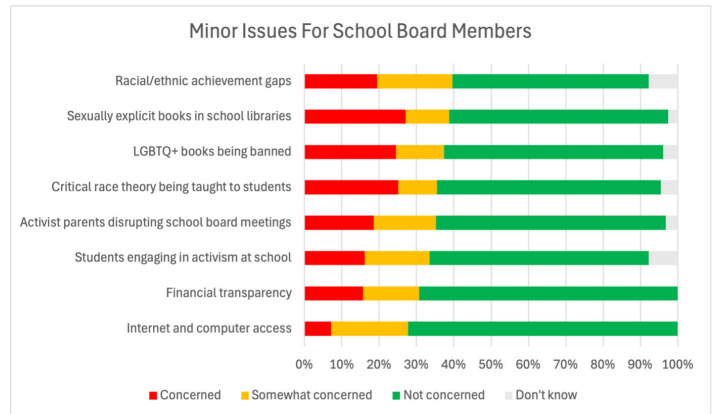


Figure 9. Shows issues that concerned or somewhat concerned 40 percent or less. N=153 to 156 depending on the issue.

ACADEMIC ISSUES

As Figure 10 shows, a majority of board members are concerned or somewhat concerned about academic issues in their district. Seventy-five percent expressed concern about grades and standardized test scores, and the same percentage about the lack of support for struggling students, while 70 percent were worried about curriculum relevance and quality and 68 percent a lack of advanced learning opportunities.

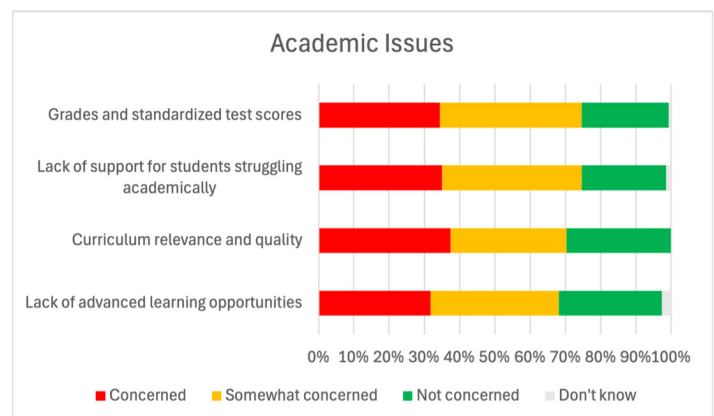


Figure 10. N=155.

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FINANCIAL ISSUES

As Figure 11 illustrates, when it came to financial issues, board members were more concerned about a lack of funds than misspent funds. Seventy-six percent said they were concerned or somewhat concerned about programs being underfunded, while 55 percent said teacher pay and benefits were too low. Forty-six percent expressed concern about fiscal irresponsibility, while just 31 percent were worried about financial transparency.

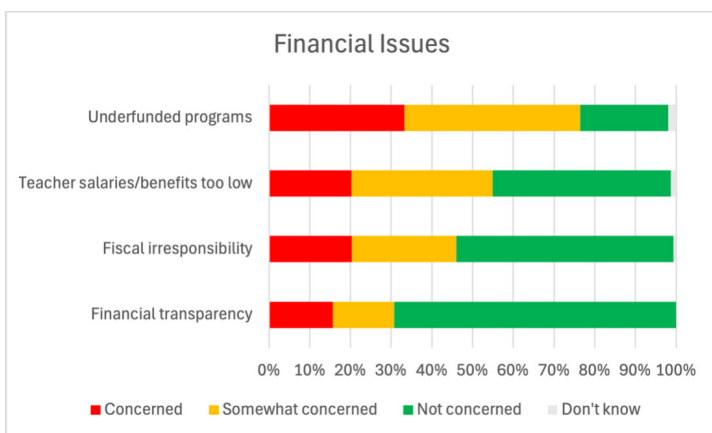


Figure 11. N=153.

INFRASTRUCTURE ISSUES

Figure 12 shows that concern with infrastructure varied widely from issue to issue, with 72 percent concerned or somewhat concerned about building conditions compared to just 28 percent about internet and computer access. Sixty-six percent expressed concern with transportation in their district, and 51 percent with its recreational facilities.

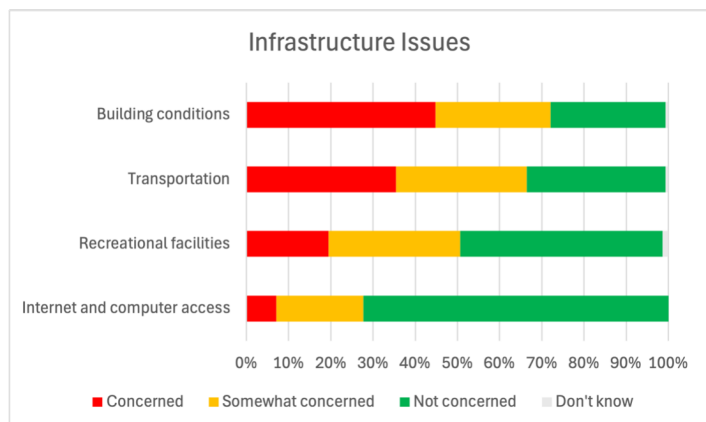


Figure 12. N=155.

STAFFING ISSUES

Staffing issues were another major concern for board members, with 83 percent concerned or somewhat concerned about teacher shortages, as seen in Figure 13. Seventy-four percent expressed concern about dissatisfied staff, and the same percentage about staff quitting or retiring. Fifty-five percent expressed concern about the difficulty of finding new administrators.

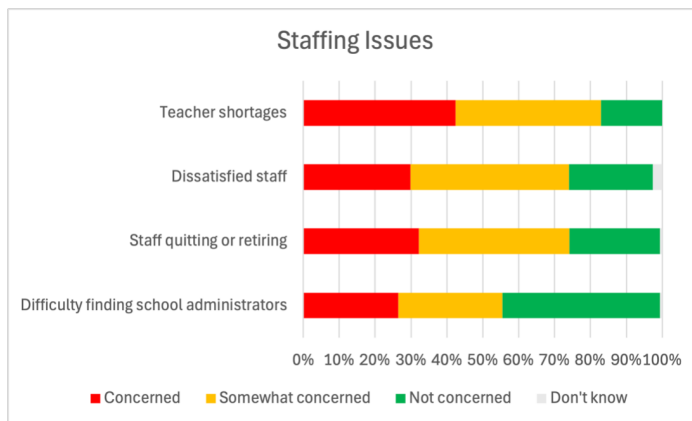


Figure 13. N=155.

MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Figure 14 shows that 86 percent of board members were concerned or somewhat concerned about the number of students with mental health problems in their district. Eighty-three percent expressed concern about bullying and harassment, 75 percent about the number of students using drugs and alcohol, and 74 percent about teachers providing mental health support to their students.

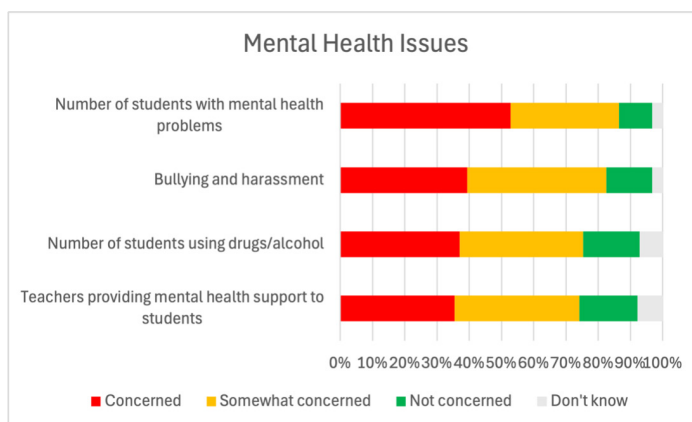


Figure 14. N=156.

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BEHAVIOR ISSUES

Figure 15 shows that 80 percent of board members were concerned or somewhat concerned about chronic absenteeism and 79 percent about students acting out in class. Fifty-seven percent expressed concerns about school violence and 48 percent about the number of students needing to be restrained or secluded.

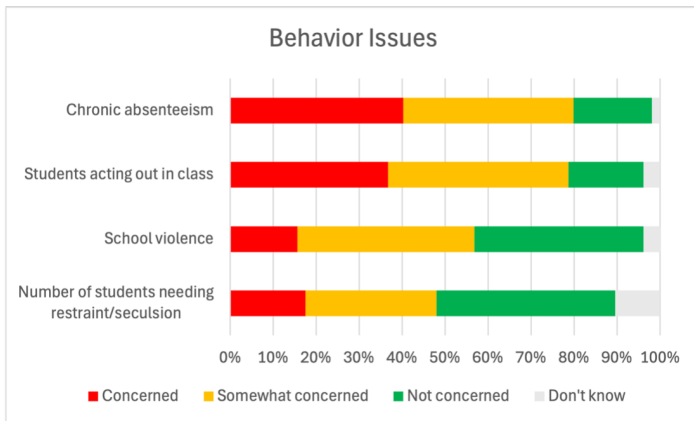


Figure 15. N=155.

DISABILITY ISSUES

Figure 16 shows that 68 percent of board members were concerned or somewhat concerned about the number of students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), 64 percent about the availability of special education services, and 60 percent about the number of students with 504 plans (which provides accommodations so a student with a disability can learn in a regular classroom). Just over half (52 percent) expressed concern about the quality of special education services in their district.

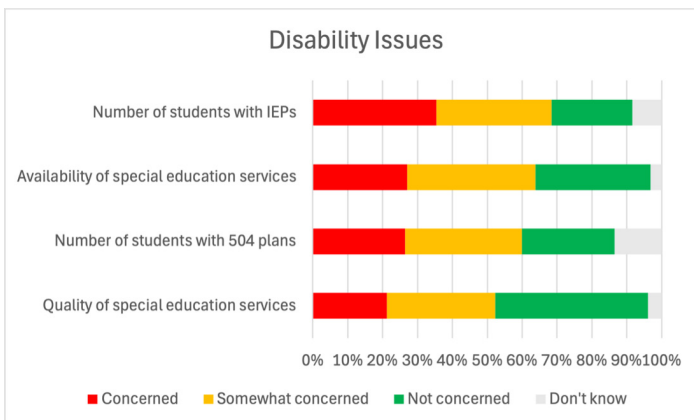


Figure 16. N=155.

ACTIVISM ISSUES

Figure 17 shows that 52 percent of board members were concerned or somewhat concerned about teachers being criticized for discussing uncomfortable topics with their students, while 48 percent expressed concern about teachers bringing their politics into the classroom. Thirty-five percent expressed concern about activist parents disrupting school board meetings and 34 percent about students engaging in activism at school.

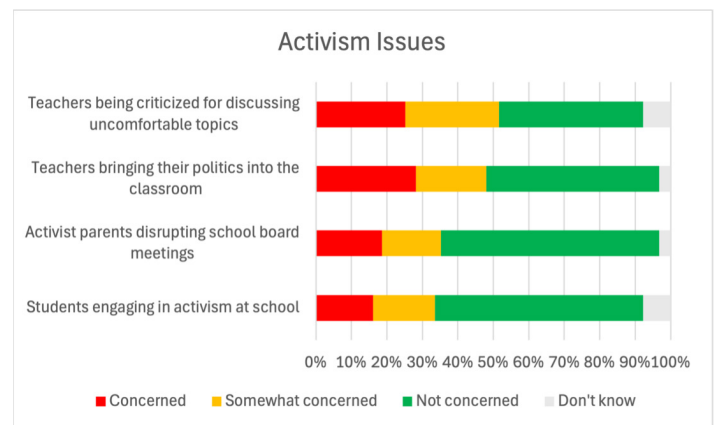


Figure 17. N=156.

GENDER & SEXUALITY ISSUES

As Figure 18 shows, a near equal number of board members were concerned or somewhat concerned about students gender transitioning at school without their parents knowing (52 percent) as transgender students being mistreated (51 percent). Similarly, a near-equal number are worried about sexually explicit books in school libraries (39 percent) as LGBTQ+ books being banned (37 percent).

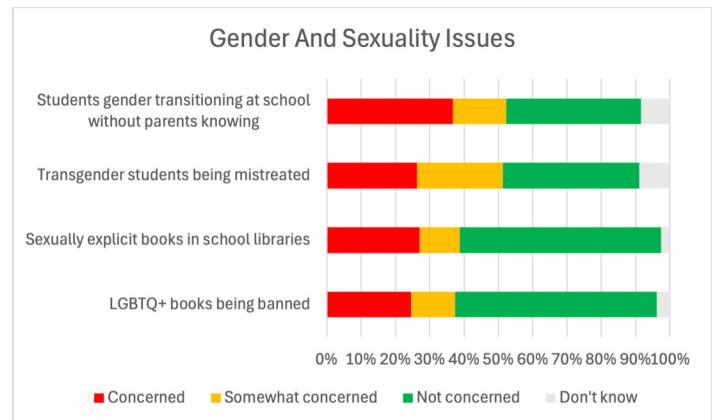


Figure 18. N=156.

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DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION ISSUES

Figure 19 shows that 44 percent of board members were concerned or somewhat concerned about an emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) over academic excellence, while nearly the same percentage (43 percent) expressed concern over the lack of diverse representations in curriculum and materials. Forty percent expressed concern about racial and ethnic achievement gaps and 36 percent with critical race theory being taught to students.

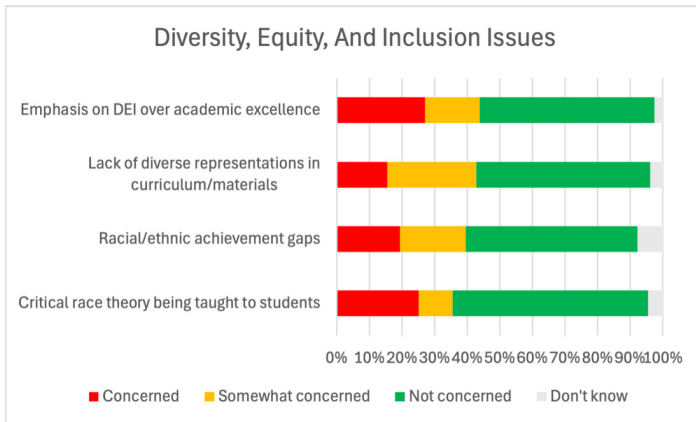


Figure 19. N=156.

POLITICAL POLARIZATION

As Figure 20 shows, liberal and conservative board members did not diverge greatly in their concern with top issues like mental health, staffing, and behavior.

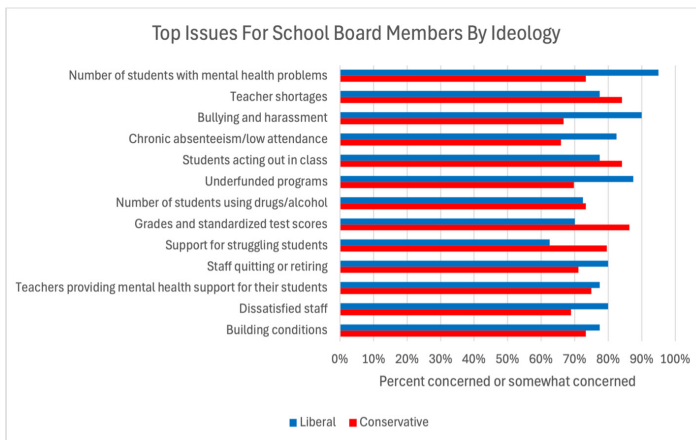


Figure 20. N=83-85 (40 liberals and 43 to 45 conservatives depending on the issue).

However, when it came to culture war issues, liberal and conservative board members shared little common ground. Figure 21 shows liberal and conservative board members' views on activism, gender and sexuality, and diversity, equity, and inclusion issues.

The differences are stark. For instance, just 5 percent of liberal board members are concerned or somewhat concerned about critical race theory being taught to students while 73 percent of conservative board members are. Sixty-three percent of liberals expressed concern about the lack of diverse representations in curriculum and materials, while just 18 percent of conservatives shared this concern.

Regarding transgender issues, over twice as many liberals as conservatives worried about transgender students being mistreated at school, while over four times as many conservatives as liberals expressed concern about students gender transitioning at school without their parents knowing.

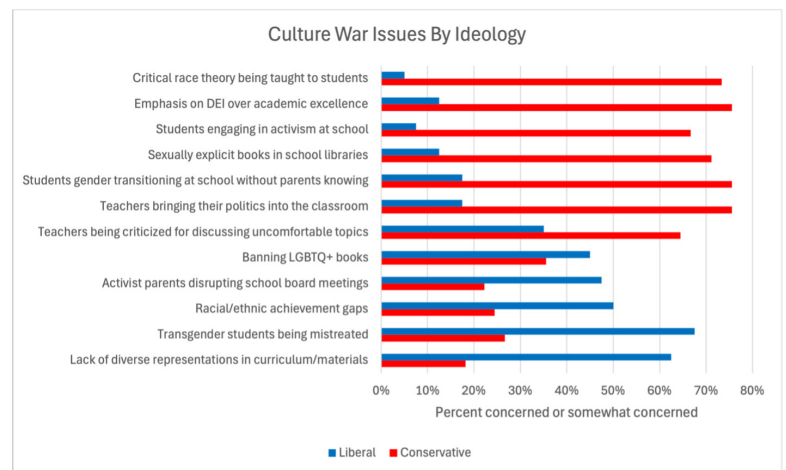


Figure 21. N=83-85 (40 liberals and 43 to 45 conservatives depending on the issue).

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ANALYSIS

School Board Members Skew Older But Are Ideologically Balanced

Nearly half of school board members (44 percent) were aged 65 years or older, while just 18 percent were under 45. Given that older members are unlikely to have children still in school, many board decisions may be made by individuals without direct, immediate experience of the current school system, potentially influencing priorities and perspectives on education issues. When it comes to ideology and political affiliation, however, board members are well-balanced, with nearly one-third each identifying as liberal, moderate, and conservative.

Board Members Trust the School Board System

A majority of board members have very positive views of their board, describing its performance as “good” or “excellent,” saying it engages in Maine Policy Institute’s school board best practices, and that it makes good decisions. When they have questions about school board operations and policy, a majority turn to the superintendent’s office or their board’s chair, and a third turn to the Maine School Management Association or Maine School Board Association. These findings suggest that most board members broadly trust the school board system and are not concerned about transparency, accountability, or other structural issues.

Most Are Concerned About the Same Issues

Regardless of political ideology, board members rank mental health, behavior, staffing, academics, funding, and building conditions as top issues. In particular, the number of students with mental health issues, bullying and harassment, chronic absenteeism, and teacher shortages consistently reveal themselves to be top issues, garnering 80

percent or more concerned or somewhat concerned. The universal prioritization of these issues indicates that board members are united in their commitment to addressing the challenges impacting student well-being and educational quality.

Liberals and Conservatives are Polarized on Culture War Issues

When it comes to culture war issues, liberal and conservative board members are highly polarized and have little in common. For instance, over 75 percent of conservative board members were concerned or somewhat concerned about students gender transitioning without parental knowledge, teachers bringing their politics into the classroom, and diversity, equity, and inclusion being emphasized over academic excellence, while less than 20 percent of liberal board members expressed concern over such issues.

LIMITATIONS

This survey had a few notable limitations. First, 10 percent of school board members did not have a chance to participate because the emails they were sent bounced. Second, given that the survey was conducted electronically, some board members without reliable internet access or who were less technologically savvy may not have participated. Third, the voluntary nature of the survey may have introduced participation bias, as those with strong opinions about their school board may have been more likely to complete it than those with moderate or weak opinions.

Finally, Maine Policy Institute’s reputation as a center-right think tank may have led some ideologically liberal board members to forgo responding and potentially influenced a greater share of conservative board members to answer the survey, although a near equal share of liberals, moderates, and conservatives ultimately participated.



Maine Policy Institute is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that conducts detailed and timely research to educate the public, the media, and lawmakers about public policy solutions that advance economic freedom and individual liberty in Maine.