

Executive Director's Message

Local Control: A Right and a Responsibility

By Jeannie M. (Sis) Henry
GSBA Executive Director



The idea of local control of education was born when citizens in towns and villages in America wished to keep decisions concerning their one-room schoolhouses "close to the people." The duty of monitoring what the school children were learning and how the schoolhouse was being run fell to school boards dedicated to the education of the community's youth.

As our nation's one-room schoolhouses grew into multi-room mega educational centers connected via a school district, the idea of lay control of public education has remained central to our democracy.

It's important to understand this historical perspective because local control is under siege. The Georgia constitution grants to school boards the authority for "management and control" of the state's public school systems. Yet, in the 2005 Georgia General Assembly there were numerous legislative attempts to circumvent the legal authority of local school boards. One of the best examples was the delay in start date legislation.

In the March 9, 2005, issue of *Education Week*, William G. Howell discusses the issue of declining local control of public education and asserts that the number of school boards is dwindling and those remaining are "weaker in stature." He also draws a correlation between the funding levels that school systems receive from local, state and federal sources and the amount of regulation schools find themselves under:

In 1920, public elementary and secondary schools relied on local governments for 83 percent of their funds, state governments for 17

percent, and the federal government for less than 1 percent. By 2000, on a national average local revenues constituted just 43 percent of total expenditures, while the state and federal governments kicked in for 50 percent and 7 percent respectively. Accompanying these funds are increasing numbers of regulations affecting what schools teach, how their contracts are written, who is hired, and when they can be fired.

How is the evolution coming about? Mr. Howell suggests in his article that there is a shift from a top down hierarchy that has been our history to one where parents and citizens are calling for a "bottom up accountability system, whereby schools attempt to attract and retain students whose parents enjoy a wide range of educational options." He uses as examples

vouchers, intra- and inter- district public school choice, magnet schools and charter schools, all with the intention of "introducing choice and competition to an expanding marketplace."

I maintain that there also are other factors at work. In and around education circles there is a lot of mistrust. Big dollars are at stake. Tremendous responsibilities are on the shoulders of local educational leaders, educators and state leaders who are called into question when test scores (as one example) don't measure up to expectations. In addition you have the rare, but well-publicized, instances of unethical behavior of boards themselves. When you

have board members who don't understand their roles, or others who misuse funds, their actions taint the institution.

Tom Walker of the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* recently* interviewed John Knapp of the Southern Institute for Business and Professional Ethics who said, "Today's climate is unforgiving. Leaders have to be more vigilant than ever before to avoid loss of trust and confidence. More important than that, they must proactively work to build trust by establishing ethical principles. In the past we assumed we had that public trust — it was taken for granted. Now, it's incumbent on leaders to build trust on a day-to-day basis."

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Mr. Knapp was also asked whether he thought there is more wrongdoing today, or if we simply are aware of it today because it is reported. Referring to corporate scandals, Mr. Knapp replied he thought it was the latter because “what we’ve learned from recent years is that a relative handful of executives proved they could not be trusted to behave ethically – so everybody is paying the price.” I believe the same is happening in public education.

The core of GSBA’s mission is ensuring excellence in the governance of local school systems. We are dedicated to providing information, training and guidance to new and veteran school board members on issues ranging from ethics and roles and responsibilities to school finance and policy. We offer boards numerous opportunities to become involved in the legislative process and, through Capitol Watch Online, send regular information on Georgia’s General Assembly. GSBA is only a “mouse click” or a phone call away for anyone needing information about our services. We welcome assisting any Georgia board of education in becoming a more effective governing body. Just a note: the vast majority of school boards in America model excellence and in Georgia, we make every effort to use boards and board members in our training programs to share best practices.

Mr. Knapp says, and I agree, “to be successful... requires people to trust each other and act ethically.” He continues, “And to the extent that we fail to do that, we become less free because we have to substitute laws instead of self restraint.”

It is vitally important that we are all aware of the increasing encroachment that legislation, rules and regulations have on the idea of local control of education. It affects the underlying fabric of public education. The beauty of having lay control of public education is having a community choose who it wants to govern its own school system.

While we need to be wary of increased attempts to take away decision-making powers that are best left to a local board to make on behalf of the electorate, we also need to remain vigilant in our responsibility to model excellence in boardmanship. **GSBA**

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From left: **Ed Murray**, Douglas County board member; **Don Rooks**, GSBA legislative specialist; **Judy Sims**, Rome City Schools board member; **Phil Gingrey**, U.S. representative; **David Banks**, Thomaston-Upson board member; **Laura Searcy**, Cobb County board member; and **Julia Bernath**, Fulton County board member, visit during the NSBA FRN Conference.

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during this session of the Georgia General Assembly. I know that the efforts of school board members to advocate for local control made a difference in defeating several pieces of legislation. Clarifying the need for local control is a responsibility we all bear. We must continue to know the issues and help our constituents and legislative delegations realize that we understand the needs of our children and community best at the local level. GSBA’s Capitol Watch Online is invaluable in that regard.

I believe as good stewards of our public education systems, we must model excellence in school board governance. We must convey to the leadership in our community the value of public education and the role of local board members. Hopefully, if we model good boardmanship, strong leaders in our communities will want to serve in this important public service role.

It has been my honor to serve as president of GSBA. You will not find a school board association that is run better. If you are not taking advantage of the resources and talents of GSBA, you have a new opportunity coming your way. Last but not least, I would like to encourage you to attend the GSBA Summer Conference and Delegate Assembly. This conference offers opportunities to learn more about legislative issues, advocacy, professional development and networking. For board members new to GSBA, the delegate assembly is the meeting where representatives from each board vote to adopt the legislative positions of the association and elect officers for the coming year. Go to www.gsba.com for more information about the conference and pre-conference training opportunities and to register. **GSBA**