

---

# The Jacqueline P. Danzberger Memorial Lecture

Sixth Annual

## THE NEW POLITICS OF EDUCATION: NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR SCHOOL BOARDS

*Presented by*

*Michael D. Usdan*

*Senior Fellow and  
Former President  
Institute for Educational  
Leadership*

*April 10, 2006  
Chicago, IL*

**Co-Sponsored by  
The National School Boards Association  
and  
The Institute for Educational Leadership**

**NSBA BOARD OF DIRECTORS  
2005-2006**

**President**

Joan E. Schmidt\*

**President Elect**

E. Jane Gallucci\*

**Secretary Treasurer**

Norm D. Wooten\*

**Immediate Past President**

George H. McShan\*

**Directors**

Barbara L. Bolas	William R. Meek
Eldean A. Borg	Carolyn J. Ortman
Jill L. Brake	Leni N. Patterson
Mary Broderick	Earl C. Rickman III*
Diane S. Brunworth*	C. H. "Sonny" Savoie
Juanita Haugen	William L. Williams*
Robert A. Lane	Anthony L. Wong
Randy J. Manning	

***ex officio* Voting Directors**

William E. Cofield, Sr.

President, National Caucus of Black School  
Board Members

Joe Guillen

Chairman, National Caucus of Hispanic  
School Board Members

Brian K. Perkins

Chairman, Council of Urban Boards of Education

***ex officio* Non-Voting Directors**

Anne L. Bryant\*

Executive Director, National School Boards  
Association

David A. Farmelo

Chair, Council of School Attorneys

Frank E. Barham\*\*

Chairman, Federation Member Executive  
Directors' NSBA Liaison Committee

\* *Executive Committee Member*

\*\* *Executive Committee Observer*

May 2006

Dear Colleague:

The National School Boards Association (NSBA) and the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) are pleased to provide these excerpted comments from the sixth annual Jacqueline (Jackie) P. Danzberger Memorial Lecture. It was delivered at NSBA's Annual Conference (April 2006) by Michael D. Usdan, senior fellow and former president of IEL. Usdan, a former colleague and close friend of Jackie's, has devoted much of his own career to leadership and governance issues, and was instrumental in helping to establish this annual remembrance of his colleague's contributions to the field.

Usdan's remarks connected and reinforced the continuing theme of Jackie's work: school boards fulfill a necessary function, but must recast their role in school leadership to remain viable. He emphasized the reasons that school boards needed to move from micromanagement to proactive brokering between schools and the larger community, guided by a compass-like focus on student achievement.

Jackie's work during her 17-year tenure at IEL included developing, and managing programs and activities related to education governance, management, and evaluation. The American School Board Journal referred to her as one of a handful of people composing the "intellectual core" driving school governance reform. After six years, we know this event, presented in honor and memory of Jackie, continues to provide a fitting tribute to someone who left an indelible mark on the world of school governance. It also provides a forum for discussing the tough issues challenging school boards today. We will continue to explore new ways to get the results of these conversations before more school board members across the country.

We are pleased that the partnership between the NSBA and IEL is strong. We are grateful to the donors who continue providing the financial support that makes it possible to commemorate Jackie's importance to American education, while simultaneously providing a forum for a non-partisan discourse about the key work of school boards.

Anne L. Bryant  
Executive Director, NSBA

Elizabeth L. Hale  
President, IEL

*Excerpted remarks from Michael D. Usdan...*

In the early 1980's, the country's purported economic weaknesses and lack of global competitiveness precipitated the unprecedented involvement of business and political leaders in education. Concerns about an inadequately trained work force began to focus on the weaknesses of the schools. Reports such as **A Nation at Risk** decried the lack of academic vigor and adequacy in an increasingly technological and competitive international economy. Indeed, the weakness of our schools was denounced as being tantamount to "unilateral disarmament."

Since that time, the nation's business and political leaders have coalesced around the need for greater accountability and higher academic standards to improve the quality of education. We now have on a bi-partisan basis education presidents, education governors, and, increasingly, education-focused mayors and county executives. Major business groups like the Business Roundtable, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and the Committee for Economic Development continue to catalyze influential private sector leaders to push for improved education outcomes at the local, regional, state, and national levels. Important groups representing elected officials like the National Governors Association, the National Conference of State Legislatures, the U.S. Conference of Mayors, and the National League of Cities likewise have focused intensively on school reform. These influential

interest groups have been instrumental in pushing the accountability movement, the capstone of which, of course, is the federal No Child Left Behind Legislation enacted in 2001.

This “new politics of education” has preempted traditional school leadership. School boards, as well as chief state school officers, school superintendents, teacher union leaders, and others within the traditional ranks of professional education have been bypassed by the new secular leaders of school reform. Several other major changes have dramatically reshaped the role of school boards and traditional intergovernmental educational policy relationships.

We now have a broader definition of public schools in an era of choice, charters, and privatization. Globalization, technology, economic competition, terrorism, the Katrina tragedy, and other powerful external forces outside of traditional schooling have radically changed the context in which both school and general purpose government operate. There has been an escalating confluence of these forces including profound demographic changes in the composition of the student body and general population that have generated a rather pervasive crisis of confidence in all government at the local, state, and national levels. And, school boards and local school leaders have been prime targets for this disaffection because of their accessibility and particular vulnerability at the grassroots level in local communities.

The late John Gardner, in describing this dilution of confidence in representative government, bemoaned decades ago the growing prevalence of an “anti-leadership vaccine” that was making public service a much less appealing career or voluntary option for talented, committed, and socially conscious citizens. Indeed, former Secretary of Education, Richard Riley, in his comments at the Inaugural Danzberger Lecture in 2001, identified the need for developing a new generation of leaders for public education. He cited Jackie Danzberger’s belief that “the most salient issue facing growing numbers of school districts is the dearth of individuals interested in accepting leadership positions.”

These diverse external forces have also “politicized” the schools in unprecedented ways. Their impact on school boards has been dramatic and includes centralizing educational decision-making and reshaping local school governance. The estimated 20% annual turnover rate of school board members reflects the difficulty of school board service at a time when the relentless national focus on academic standards and student achievement has put unprecedented pressure on schools to improve student outcomes.

The increased national focus on improving education and the media coverage attendant to schools in the nation’s largest metropolitan areas have propelled school governance to the forefront of public concern. In reality, the overwhelming number of school districts in

the country have been largely unaffected by these “new” developments, and generalizations about institutions as diverse as the traditional 14,000-plus school boards are tenuous at best. However, the need to compete more effectively in a world that is being transformed by economic, technological, and demographic changes has put the entire American educational enterprise on everyone’s radar screen. School boards in all kinds of districts will be compelled to respond to these new realities and to reshape the way they function and perform.

The irreversible focus on student outcomes, which seemingly puts inordinate pressure on school boards, can also provide a unique opportunity for boards and the regional, state, and national organizations which represent them to reshape their fundamental roles and responsibilities.

Rightly or wrongly, many boards have been criticized for micromanaging. They have been accused of ignoring major education issues and focusing inordinately on administrative matters such as worrying about whether ‘buns are hot in the cafeteria or the buses are running on time.’ Allegedly, special or single-interest groups are able to dominate the electoral process in many communities with the resultant erosion of the trusteeship concept of board service, in which members represented the entire community, not just one segment.

Jim Geringer, former Governor of Wyoming, at last year's Danzberger Lecture cogently urged board members to:

“Stay out of process and focus on purpose. Governance is meaningful only when guided by purpose. Leaders focus on purpose; managers focus on process. Board members are in the leader category. You weren't elected to be managers.”

This is vitally important advice to repeat. Board members would be wise to seriously consider supporting legislation which would reshape their fundamental roles and responsibilities so that they can focus upon student achievement and not be distracted by operational or ministerial responsibilities that should be delegated to administrative staff. Keeping a laser-like focus on student achievement is supported by NSBA and by many state associations with their emphasis on the “key work” of boards—student achievement. The growing focus on student achievement also will serve to enhance the status of boards among the influential political and business drivers of accountability and education improvement. It would also enhance the chances of keeping many dedicated board members who, frustrated by meaningless petty bickering over minutiae, terminate their service all too quickly.

Many school districts are responding to this new imperative. The Board of Education in the School District of Hillsborough County



(Florida), for example, devotes a specified time at each of its bi-monthly meetings to explicitly discuss issues relating to student achievement. Teachers, parents, and students participate in these discussions with board members.

Boards should not be diverted from their focus on student learning by diffused and multiple operational responsibilities that compel them to be everything to everybody. This “encrustation” and “dumping” of ministerial non-education duties has compelled board members to provide constituency services akin to those provided by state legislators, Congressmen, and other elected officials. In brief, the current roles and responsibilities of boards are dysfunctional and are not congruent with the unprecedented national preoccupation with improved student achievement.

Most critics of contemporary school boards do not advocate their elimination or consider them to be “vestigial organs.” Indeed, they overwhelmingly and ardently support the need for public oversight of the educational enterprise. These critics join many in the school board community, including current school board members and association leaders, in the belief that a clarification of school board roles would enhance both the prestige and influence of a remarkably durable institution, which in so many ways represents the quintessence of representative grassroots democracy in the United States.

Jackie Danzberger, for one, in an introduction to IEL's first book on school boards, expressed her strong support for the institution of local school boards:

“As we moved out from this city (Washington, DC) by the Potomac, we found citizens do not believe school boards are “dinosaurs left over from our agrarian past,” as has been suggested by some national observers. We did, however, find consensus, even among many school board leaders, that school boards need to be strengthened and must carefully look at their weaknesses, if they are to exercise effective positive leadership during this unique time of opportunity.”<sup>1</sup>

Jackie's words written two decades ago resonate even more compellingly in the current context of education reform and potential transformation.

Jackie fervently believed, as do contemporary supporters of change, that school boards should focus their energies upon the transcendent objective of improving student performance and should not be “saddled with the trivia” that so often generates dysfunctional factionalism. Her position on this vital issue has been reinforced in other Danzberger Lectures. Former Secretary of Education Rod Paige in 2002 and philanthropist Eli Broad in 2003 agreed with Jackie that boards “spend too little time on major concerns and too much time on administrative trivia.”

---

<sup>1</sup> **School Boards: Strengthening Grass Roots Leadership.** (1986). Jacqueline P. Danzberger, Michael D. Usdan, Luvern Cunningham, Lila N. Carol, Michael W. Kirst, and Barbara McCloud. The Institute for Educational Leadership, Washington, DC. (page ii)

Advocates of a more circumscribed role for school boards believe that they should focus upon the following major functions—all predicated upon the paramount objective of improving student academic outcomes:

1. Setting Goals and Planning (focus on new ideas and innovative alternatives designed to make schools more adaptive to more diverse student bodies; work with outside business and civic leaders; education is more than schooling)
2. Budgeting and Allocating Resources
3. Monitoring Accountability (student learning)
4. Employing the Superintendent

The breakdown of the local governance system in many communities (particularly problem plagued large urban districts that receive inordinate media coverage) documents many board members' struggles as they face contentious, splintered citizen groups, litigation, and a multitude of government regulations and categorical requirements that increasingly preempt their authority. They are frustrated and beleaguered by multiple constraints that subvert their ability to meet citizen expectations. This public disaffection has led to a number of governance experiments, none of which has yielded a structural panacea.

Large districts have "see-sawed" between centralization and decentralization. Changes have been made in whether boards are elected or appointive. There have been a number of examples of abortive state takeovers of school systems, primarily urban, and an escalating number of examples of more proactive mayoral involvement in education.

These dynamics represent a wonderful opportunity for school boards to proactively reshape their roles. As elected officials, board members should utilize their political capital to more proactively serve as brokers between the schools and the larger community, particularly including the aforementioned business and political influentials who are currently shaping national and state educational policy.

In all too many cases, lay board members, who have very different and unique responsibilities as policymakers, are indistinguishable from the professional educators they employ. More board members must unshackle themselves from operational issues (as important as they often are) and spend their energies cultivating political, civic, and media influentials whose support will be so essential to the future of public education.

Many school board associations are already responding to these challenges and opportunities by developing training programs that stress the importance of board leadership in building a stronger public constituency in support of education. State school board associations in Colorado, Kentucky, and Maryland, for example, are proactively seeking to discover public attitudes through statewide conversations. These broadly gauged discussions focus not only on formal school issues but also on more generic educational, social, political and economic concerns of the citizenry.

These initiatives help to project the school board as a vital and unique brokering entity between

the schools and the larger society. They also help to make school boards more visible and to mitigate the civic ignorance about their roles and responsibilities which so commonly prevails among even sophisticated, engaged citizens. In journalist Neil Peirce's words, these approaches will help throw "sudden and welcome light on that dark island of American governance, the institution that everyone knows of but few understand: the school board."

Board members as elected officials with their own political base of support should emulate these efforts and devote more of their time to building external constituencies to support the schools. No one in local communities is in a stronger position to do so either politically or substantively. Melinda French Gates said at the 2004 Danzberger Lecture, ". . . Jackie expressed it perfectly when she wrote that 'local school boards are among the last grassroots governing bodies that touch us all—children, parents, educators, business leaders, and elected officials.'"

The nation's rapidly changing demographics make this more of an imperative. With only 20% to 25% of an aging American population having children in school, and with the minority student population burgeoning, public education will have to compete in new ways for scarce resources at every governmental level. School board members must be in the forefront of such efforts as ambassadors to the larger community and not be buried in relatively inconsequential internal operational matters.



The Jacqueline P. Danzberger Memorial Lecture presentation, printing, and distribution are made possible in part by a memorial fund established at the Institute for Educational Leadership in 2000 to honor her memory. The following persons have delivered the lecture:

- 2001 Richard W. Riley, U.S. Secretary of Education, 1992-2000
- 2002 Rod Paige, U.S. Secretary of Education, 2001-2004
- 2003 Eli Broad, Chairman, AIG Sun America Inc. & Founder, The Broad Foundation
- 2004 Melinda French Gates, Co-Founder Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
- 2005 Roy E. Barnes, Former Governor, GA  
Jim Geringer, Former Governor, WY
- 2006 Michael D. Usdan, Senior Fellow & Former President, Institute for Educational Leadership

## **IEL BOARD OF DIRECTORS**

**Joseph A. Aguerrebere, Jr.**

President

National Board for Professional Teaching Standards

**Roy Barnes, Chair**

Former Governor of Georgia

**Raymond “Buzz” Bartlett**

Director of Corporate and  
Foundation Relations

The University of Maryland, College Park

**Bert Berkley**

Chairman of the Board

Tension Envelope Corporation

**Daniel Domenech**

Senior Vice President for  
National Urban Markets

The McGraw-Hill Companies

**Badi Foster**

Phelps-Stokes Fund  
President

**Elizabeth L. Hale**

President

Institute for Educational Leadership

**Regan C. Kenyon**

President

Secondary School Admission Test Board

**John May**

Partner

New Vantage Partners, LLC

**C. Kent McGuire**

Dean, College of Education  
Temple University

**Ericka M. Miller**

Vice President and Director  
Isaacson, Miller

**Piedad F. Robertson**

President

Education Commission of the States

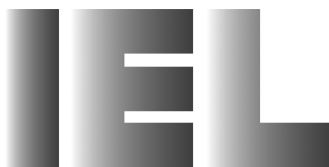
For more information, please contact:



**National School Boards Association**

1680 Duke Street  
Alexandria, VA 22314  
(703) 838-6722  
Fax: (703) 683-7590  
E-mail: [Info@nsba.org](mailto:Info@nsba.org)  
Web site: [www.nsba.org](http://www.nsba.org)

and



**Institute for Educational Leadership**

4455 Connecticut Avenue, NW  
Suite 310

Washington, DC 200086  
(202) 822-8405  
Fax: (202) 872-4050  
E-mail: [iel@iel.org](mailto:iel@iel.org) \*  
Web site: [www.iel.org](http://www.iel.org)