Chapter 4
School Boards in Norway

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Abstract The current country report describes and pictures Norwegian local school boards in the national school governance process. A relatively potent layer of local politicians with education as policy specialism emerges from the Norwegian country case, where school board members are active local politicians with a clear motivation structure linked to school improvement and educational policy. At the same time the country report highlights strong influence on local policy processes from transnational and actors and state bodies. First, OECD lays down, yet indirectly, premises for the local school governing discourse in order to fit PISA as the educational "benchmark". Second and nested (within this policy discourse), the state has strengthened its steering core towards municipalities, schools and teachers through a large body of standardized performance indicators and national tests, from which results are made publicly available for media and stakeholders. Third, the state has in the same period transferred significant responsibilities and degrees of freedom (in regulative terms) to municipalities as school owners. Local decision-making in pedagogy can fairly well be interpreted as a process of "blueprinting" of state policies. Local school politicians are tightly coupled to the administrative core and the top apex of the municipality organization. Taken together the chapter leaves the image that local school policy specialism has been significantly transferred from the political camp to the administrative centers of the municipality organization, at the same time as the state has coupled school professionals stronger to national and transnational policies.

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4.1   Introduction

Despite having a relatively large surface area of 324,000 km², with a distance of 1,800 km from north to south, Norway is a small country with a population of approximately 4.9 million. Norwegian local government is based on a two-tier structure consisting of 428 municipalities and 19 counties, and both tiers have directly elected councils and their own administration, though they have separate functions. The 19 counties are responsible for upper secondary education and vocational training at the regional level, while the 428 primary municipalities, which are the subject of this study, are responsible for providing their inhabitants with a primary and lower secondary education, basic health-care services, elderly care, and technical infrastructure. The municipality structure is scattered, and approximately half of all Norwegian municipalities have less than 5,000 inhabitants, whereas 10 have more than 50,000 inhabitants. Oslo, the capital of Norway, is the largest municipality, with 630,000 inhabitants.

Since the first PISA study placed Norway at the mean level of the participating OECD countries, the mass media and politicians have put their primary focus on how to raise the student achievements that have been perceived as mediocre (Kjærnsli 2007). However, researchers have been more concerned by the significant amounts of within-class and within-school variation in student learning – a pattern that has been visible before the PISA studies (Haug and Bachmann 2007). These reported inequalities correlate significantly to student background, ethnical culture, and gender, which indicate that the basic school system reproduces social class differences. Moreover, and alarmingly, there has been a stable but low completion rate in upper secondary education, in which one out of four drops out of school. Specifically, within vocational training the dropout rate on a national level has varied between 35 and 36 % of a cohort (Paulsen 2008), and there have been few signs of improvement despite several national strategies (Markussen et al. 2011).

In Norway, as in most other countries, a strong wave of standardization has followed in the aftermath of the PISA studies over the last decade (Meyer and Benavot 2013). A national quality assurance system (NQAS) was launched in 2005 in order to improve the national standard of student achievements. Moreover, the State Directorate of Training and Education was established in 2006, and this semi-independent body has been responsible for managing a bulk of the standardized measurement instruments such as national achievement tests, student assessment surveys, and teacher assessment surveys. Thus, a strong trend of centralization has been observable through national quality assurance and the standardization of educational targets, including a mix of hard and soft governance (Moos 2009).

At the same time, powers and authorities are decentralized from the state to the Norwegian municipalities with the purpose of steering schools more effectively. In this mixed governing regime, the aim of the current study was to empirically illuminate how transnational and national policies are transformed into local school governance seen from the perspective of local school boards. The empirical investigation was organized in two phases, in which the first one collected data on the names

and e-mail addresses of school board members from Norwegian municipalities. Approximately 300 out of 428 municipalities responded to the survey, which gave a final starting sample of approximately 1,900 possible respondents. Due to their political two-layer structure with no specific school board, approximately 15 % of the sample dropped of the remaining municipalities. Of the remaining population, a total of 833 individual school board members responded to the survey, which left the study with an effective response rate of approximately 40 %. The survey was carried out in September 2011, which means that the respondents were captured at the end point of their election term from 2007 to 2011.

4.2 Reforms of the Norwegian Educational System

4.2.1 From Segmented to Fragmented State Governing

Research on state governing and power relations in the Norwegian society has identified a shift from a traditional governing model labeled the "segmented state model" (Olsen 1978)[1] towards a "fragmented state model" (Tranøy and Østerud 2001). The first model, identified as the dominant model in the 1970s, was characterized by a collection of clearly defined institutional sectors, in which it was clear who belongs to the policy field (state, directorate, municipalities, schools) and who does not. Furthermore, each segment, or policy domain, was characterized by a system-wide architecture and legal, administrative, and financial interdependence between levels of jurisdiction (state, municipalities, schools). As identified round the millennium shift, the model labeled "the fragmented state model" primarily conceives of public policies as "service industries." This model is in accordance with similar labels of governing such as "the supermarket state model" (Olsen 1988). In addition, each policy field is populated with a range of actors on a larger number of levels than in the first model. What is more, the power and capacity to make collective decisions is diffused among a variety of actors in complex networks. With its emphasis on employability and many intersections between political and economic actors, a shift towards Ove K. Pedersen's notion of "the competitive state model" (Pedersen 2011) has been observable however not entirely. Civil service research in Norway has also inferred that Norway has both been a latecomer and a "slow learner" in the implementation of New Public Management ideas into practice (Christensen and Lægreid 2001). On the one hand, Norway is evidently affected by transnational policy trends, while at the same time as norms of decentralism and local democracy are still observable in this policy field on the other hand (Møller and Skedsmo 2013).

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[1] The Norwegian Power Study 1972–1978: a grand project aiming to capture power relationships and the distribution of power in Norwegian society. The first Power Study was followed up by the second one in 1998–2003.

4.2.2   Current Trends

Since Norway experienced its modest achievement ranking in the first OECD panel study (Kjærnsli et al. 2004), a series of national policy initiatives have been launched in order to raise the level of student achievements among secondary school students (Skedsmo 2009). Specifically, in order to steer school prioritization at lower levels more effectively, a national quality assurance system (NQAS) was established in 2005 and yet is managed by a state body, the National Directorate of Education and Training that was formed in 2006 (Eurydice 2006). Following the systemic reform known as the Knowledge Promotion, which was implemented in 2006–2009, and with its strong emphasis on standardized achievement targets, it represents per se a visible shift from input orientation towards outcome orientation curriculum under- standing. The Royal Ministry of Education and Research (2006) is also a school governing reform, in which the 428 municipalities and 19 counties were delegated responsibilities by the state to be in charge of reform implementation in relation to the adaptation of educational provisions to a heterogeneous student population, local curriculum adaptation, the development of formative assessment models, and quality assurance towards schools.

As prescribed in the Educational Act, all municipalities have to produce an annual aggregated quality report of the standard of primary education (within the municipal- ity). This yearly report has to be dealt with, discussed, and finally decided upon by the municipal council. The content of the report follows a state-mandated template that is basically centered round the aggregation of performance indicators of schooling (grades, national test results, student satisfaction surveys, teachers' job satisfaction) – yet there are some degrees of freedom for each of the municipalities to fill in issues. The second component is supervision practices, and in each of the 19 counties, there is an educational governor, a state civil servant, who is in charge of supervision towards municipalities. The governor then approaches a sample of municipalities within his or her county, and they carry out a meeting that is followed up by school visits. Three properties are important: First, each year only a certain group of munici- palities are targeted for supervision and control. Second, not all schools within a municipality (under supervision) are followed up by direct visits. Third, since munici- palities are targets for supervision, it is possible to buffer schools. Analyses of the superintendent study in 2009 support this notion: Superintendents buffer schools from certain issues (that are central in the national quality assurance system) in their daily dialogue with the school principals (Paulsen and Skedsmo 2014).

4.2.3   Decentralization of Educational Governing

Due to the great variation in size and dispersal pattern in Norwegian municipali- ties, local democracy and autonomy have been important in the Norwegian wel- fare state model. Decentralization has also been deliberately used as a design

parameter for the purpose of counterbalancing the state's power in educational politics (Bukve and Hagen 1994; Møller and Skedsmo 2013). Moreover, this feature is historically rooted in a policy culture, in which *decentralism* in terms of local autonomy for municipalities to make priorities has been a strong value. In contrast, the ideal of a unified school system requires a series of standards (of both input of resources and required output demands), which has resulted in a strong central corpus in terms of national curriculum and national standards of resource allocation. National standardization is rooted in another important value in the Norwegian educational system over the past 50 years – namely, *equality* in opportunities for all children, which was gradually accompanied during the 1970s and 1980s with a value orientation towards *equity* in outcomes (Opheim 2004). Thus, on the one hand, the municipalities are responsible for implementing state policy and providing public services for their inhabitants, while on the other, they are the units of local government and can be considered as a meeting ground for different local interests formulated and prioritized by local politicians. Hence, centralization and decentralization have worked as "twin strategies" in building and reforming the Norwegian educational governance system (Møller and Skedsmo 2013). This means by implication that the municipalities are required to establish local routines upwards and downwards that are matched with the national system for quality assurance (NQAS) insofar as evaluating, documenting, and following up the results of the schools. Different types of data about the schools and the education sector are collected and integrated in a status report, which in the final round is submitted to the educational governor located in each of the regional counties. Compared to inspection-driven systems found in many other Western democracies, this approach does not imply direct control of teaching and learning in schools.

4.2.4 Contemporary Educational Governing: The "Blueprint Assumption"

In a policy review of Norwegian school governing from 1970 to 2007, Engeland and Langfeldt concluded that local policy formation initiatives are very seldom observable in Norwegian municipalities (Engeland and Langfeldt 2009). Noteworthy, the timespan of their review encompasses the implementation phase of The Royal Ministry of Education and Research (2006), which paradoxically presumes a substantial local engagement in policy formation through delegation and decentralization. More specifically, the government presumed that the municipalities should "fill in the gaps" in vague and underspecified goal formulations in the national curricula with their own local strategies, policy initiatives, and prioritizations. To the contrary, the researchers find that this is not the case. For example, as observed in written documents, municipal policy goals and local educational strategies are of a general and vague nature and leave the impression of being "blueprints" of national policies. This is particularly the case when it comes to the content of the curriculum,

i.e., the ideological steering of schools, as locally developed evaluation criteria (towards school principals and teachers), as well as local curriculum development, are seldom found. As further noted by Engeland, the intended level of municipal autonomy inherent in the Local Government Act of 1992 is *not* utilized within the policy domain of primary education (Engeland 2000).

4.2.5   *The Rise and Fall of Deflating Political and Administrative Designs*

Municipalities in Norway have traditionally been organized in accordance with an integrative model (Kjellberg 1988), in which the municipal organization is fairly well matched to the state's central administration. As such, an implication of this model is a functional and specialized sector administration in the municipalities with a central school office set up for the purpose of supporting each school principal, in addition to ensuring that national policies are fairly well reflected in the day-to-day school practices. By implication, the model means a structure of two layers within the municipal administration. The top layer is the municipality council and its board paired with the municipal CEO and the central administrative staff, whereas the second layer is the municipal school administration led by a school superintendent that is administratively responsible for education within the entire municipality. At the millennium shift, a series of redesign initiatives were launched in order to deflate administrative hierarchies towards a lean model with only one level within the civil service administration. In parallel, significant authorities and responsibilities were delegated directly to the school principal. Subsequent to this, approximately two-thirds of Norwegian municipalities reported that they were, or had been, in a process of deflating the administrative hierarchies (Pedersen 2009). However, most of these reform initiatives culminated around 2005 (Hovik and Stigen 2008), with the 2009 Norwegian superintendent survey showing that only 20 % of the 291 municipalities in the sample reported a structure without a central school office.

4.3   Members and Chairs of the Local School Board

School board members in Norway are not elected directly by the voters in local elections (every fourth year); instead, they are appointed indirectly by the municipal council. Out of a total of 833 members, 645 in the sample are also members of their respective municipality council, while 146 out of the 833 are also members of the municipal boards. This point gives the image that school boards are recruited relatively closely to the central core of political local government.

4.3.1 Gender, Employment, and Education

In total, 55 % of the school board members in the sample are male, whereas 45 % are female. Additionally, two-thirds of the members in the sample serve as ordinary board members without any specific leadership function attached to their role, while 19 % of the members in the sample are chairs of the school board. The distribution of employment categories among the school board members in the sample is worth a comment. First, 18.6 % of the board members work in the educational sector, which is only modest compared with the traditional role of the school board as a forum of specialism. Second, there is a high proportion of the board members who work in private business sectors, a total of approximately 40 %, which on average is significantly higher than in municipal boards and municipal councils.

Moreover, within this group, close to one out of three run their own business, thereby supporting the notion that school issues attract a broader group of local politicians than professionals working in the public sector and in education. The educational level of school board members is significantly higher than the national average of 34 % who have completed a university or university college degree (OECD 2009), and 66.8 % of the board members have tertiary educational degrees. About another 25 % of the members have completed an upper secondary education and a craftsman certificate as their highest educational level, whereas only 2.4 % (20 members) have a primary education as their highest level.

4.3.2 Political Representation

When it comes to board members' political party background, the distribution in the sample of 833 members corresponds fairly well to the ordinary political landscape in Norway, though with two exceptions: (1) 15 % of the board members belong to the Center Party, which is significantly higher than the results in the 2007 local election and (2) compared with the total result of the 2007 local electorate,[2] the Liberal-Progressive Party on the right wing is underrepresented in the sample, as shown in Table 4.1.

As such, there is a sample bias towards the center point in the Norwegian political landscape. Related to the themes subjected to this study, this moderate bias can fairly well show a more positive perception of local capabilities and resistance to municipality mergers, which are key policy issues of the Center Party – in contrast to the Liberal-Progressive Party.

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[2] Source: Statistics Norway (SSB), downloaded from: http://ssb.no/a/samfunnsspeilet/utg/200802/01/tab-2008-04-11-01.html – 6.11.2013.

Table 4.1 Party distribution in the sample and national level results – 2007 election

Political party	Representation in the sample (%)	National level 2007 municipal election
Labor Party	31.0	29.6
Conservative Party	17.0	19.3
Liberal Party	6.5	5.9
Center Party	**15.2**	**8.0**
Liberal-Progressive Party	**8.9**	**17.5**
Christian-Democratic Party	8.5	6.4
Socialist Left Party	7.6	6.2
Local election lists/others	5.3	7.1

4.3.3 Motivation Structure: Why They Joined the School Board

When asked why they accepted a position in the political board, there are three strong tendencies in the responses: (1) Education is my personal interest – and it is important for society and the local community. The vast majority of the group of respondents express a clear motivation structure such as, "the importance and value of education in the local society," accompanied by "personal interests in education" and "personal interest in school development." A minority group expresses that "I have children in school myself, so it is important to engage in this policy field." (2) A significant part of the remaining minority responded that "my party asked me" or "my position was a part of the distribution of posts between the political parties in the municipal council." (3) Only few members say in their own words that they have entered the school board to "get the budget and the finances balanced."

4.3.4 Summary and Implications

In summary, there are three noteworthy tendencies in the data. First, the data confirms that school board members are recruited from one of the two most dominant blocks in the Norwegian political system, i.e., socialist-center or conservative. Similarly, the school board members are people with a long experience in politics (years in service), and their assessments are captured at the end point of their election period from 2007 to 2011. Additionally, they are also members of the municipal council or municipal board. Second, this image is supported by data on their educational background, which is higher than the average of the Norwegian population (the portion with tertiary education). Third, in terms of motivation structure, the data expresses an aspiration to improve the primary school system in various domains within the municipality.

4.4 The Board as an Institution on the Municipal Level

4.4.1 Total Responsibility for 0–16

A significant portion of the school board members reports that their board has a wider area of responsibility, most typically responsibility for both day care and primary schooling. The full availability of day-care institutions has been a highly prioritized policy goal for the socialist-center coalition since they took office in 2005, and in practical terms, most parents are offered day care for their children if they wish. Most day-care institutions are owned and run by the municipalities, but there are also approximately 2,300 private day-care institutions that are funded by the state. Paired with the inclusion of day-care operations as part of the board's responsibility, the widespread distribution of titles on the board reflects a broad denomination that the committee in general covers the entire range of children's life and education from 0 to 16 years.

4.4.2 Issues Most Frequently Processed in the Board

The members are asked to assess the issues processed most frequently in the board, and unsurprisingly, the number one category is "financial resources and budget issues," which accounts for the 81.9 % of the members responding "often" and "very often." The second highly ranked category is "information from the school administration," while the next four ranked categories capture different domains of quality assurance: "school quality issues," "results from evaluations," "evaluation of our schools," and "student achievements" – all counting 40–50 %, "often" and "very often." In contrast, "personnel policies and recruitment" only covers 18.3 %.

4.4.3 Perception of Influence

When asked about their perception of the school board's political influence in municipal governance, the members perceive that they are influential and particularly influential in the municipal council and board's strategic decisions and economic prioritizing. They also perceive that their work has had a significant impact on primary schooling in their municipality. However, when it comes to a downward influence in terms of agenda setting at the school level, the perception of influence among school board members decreases significantly. Of note, when board members are asked about their perception of being empowered to make "decisions about local curriculum development," only approximately 20 % respond as agreeing and strongly agreeing. There are also very few examples of direct linkages between the school board and the schools within the municipality.

4.4.4   Tensions Between the State and the Municipal Level

The school board survey captures possible tensions between the state and local politicians in the area of state supervision. As noted, in the Norwegian quality assurance system, the municipalities are the target level for state supervision.[3] When the school board members are asked about their experiences with the state supervision carried out by the educational director (we first asked the members whether they have had supervision during their 4-year period), the responses cluster round two contrasting perspectives. The first perceives of state supervision as being externally controlled as well as being another bureaucratic maneuver from the state's side, both of which are overtly negative. The upfront cases cluster round an image of state supervision as an activation trigger for making improvement initiatives from the school owner's side. In a similar vein, these members perceive performance monitoring in a more positive manner as a feedback mechanism that can be productively utilized.

4.4.5   Summary and Implications

As noted, the curriculum and governance reform known as The Royal Ministry of Education and Research (2006) formally empowered the municipalities towards the responsibility for local curriculum development and adapting schooling to local demands. As referred to above, the data indicates that this is not the case in practical governance, as manifested by the low score on "decisions of local curriculum development" in board members' perceptions of political influence. This finding gives rise to a view, at least as an assumption that a large portion of Norwegian municipalities are not capable of utilizing the degrees of freedom that they enjoy in formal regulations. This inference is also supported by an analysis of municipal superintendent practices in Norway (Paulsen and Skedsmo 2014) and a comprehensive policy review (Engeland and Langfeldt 2009). The latter research couples this observation with the massive employment of standardized steering instruments by the state, which in their view dictates school policy-making at the local level.

4.5   The School Board's Governing Function

4.5.1   Critical Knowledge, Competence, and Political Decisions

School board members are asked to rank (by predefined categories) what type of knowledge they see as important for doing a good job as a school politician in a municipality. The school board underscores the need to have some knowledge

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[3] Norwegian: Tilsyn.

about "municipal economics," "pupils' learning conditions," "local governance," and "national educational politics." All these categories are preferred by more than two-thirds of the board members, and all three issues are general issues within the committee's work area. Lower scores were items such as "leadership and management" and "pedagogy." As reported, political decisions in the board are characterized by majority decisions and that there is no consistent pattern in the decision-making processes.

4.5.2   Agenda Setting and Informational Procedures

Regarding the most typical pattern of who decides the agenda for the committee meetings, the reporting is relatively clear: 68.3 % answered that the superintendent decided on the agenda together with the chair of the board, whereas 16.3 % answered that the chair of the board had decided on the agenda. Only 3.7 % answered that the agenda was created by suggestions from the board members, while 8.1 % reported that the agenda was shaped by previous meetings. These answers give rise to an assumption that municipal politics are increasingly becoming professionalized or becoming depoliticized. When school board members were asked about their assessment of the most important source of information for their work in the committee (multiple response categories), 88 % answered "information from the school administration," 68.7 % answered "official reports on issues," 53.9 % answered "information from the principals," and 40.5 % specified "impressions from school visits." The category "information from my political party" was only specified by 40.9 % of the school board members, in addition to "information from the teachers" (36.4 %) and "information from the teacher trade unions" (23.8 %). These answers leave the impression that the administrative core of the municipality is the prime source of information for the board members.

4.5.3   Summary and Implications

Administrative knowledge, such as knowledge on municipal economics, scores high on critical competence as assessed by the school board members. Moreover, knowledge of national educational politics has become more important for members of the committee because of the state-initiated control of how the municipalities act as school owners in the national quality assurance system. On the other hand, the most important sources of information come from the central school office, and superintendents play a prominent role in the agenda-setting phase of the policy process. Over and above this, the data supports an image that school boards are tightly coupled to the administrative sphere of the municipality organization in their daily functioning, as well as similarly decoupled from any pedagogical processes linked to the schools.

4.6   Important Policy Issues

The board members were asked about, "how important are the following issues for the school board." Each of the predefined categories was incrementally assessed on a 5-point scale, and when the response categories "important" and "very important" were aggregated, "budgeting and finance" was ranked highest by 91.1 % in the sample. "Follow up the schools' accomplishment of policy goals" was ranked second highest by 84.1 %, with similar scores for "quality of the teachers' work" and "leadership of the schools" at 83.1 % and 75.3 %, respectively. Given its national focus in the public debate in Norway, it is worth noting that "raising the level of student achievements on national tests" was only ranked by 58.1 % of the school board members. The survey instrument also asked the school board members in the sample to assess various stakeholders' influence on the board's decision-making. Not surprisingly, the administrative core of the central school office, including the school superintendent, consists of the stakeholders ranging highest among all.

As we can see, the overarching policy issues in the board's work are budget and finance, and the accomplishment of (central) policy goals and organizational issues. Again, there is little evidence in the data on direct interference and discussions with schools in pedagogical matters. When it comes to stakeholder influence on the school board's decision-making, the administrative core of the municipality consists of the high scorers, whereas teachers and parents are systematic low scorers in relation to perceived influence. The board members' preference structure (of policy issues and stakeholder influence) indicates tight couplings between the school board and the administrative core of the school sector in the municipality organization. In a similar vein, the data indicates that the school board's functioning and policy processes are decoupled from current school reforms in Norway as far as local curriculum development, the implementation of formative assessment practices, and participation in leadership dialogues.

4.7   Perception of Educational Capabilities

4.7.1   Assessment of Competence in Various Organizational Domains

The board members were asked to assess their own competence in relation to the work in the committee. When the response categories "fairly competent," "competent," and "very competent" were aggregated, the percentage was 97.3 %, which underscores a high level of self-believed efficacy and mastery. School board members were also asked to assess their school administration's competence. The board members assessments were measured by statements such as

"our school administration is well competent in school law issues." Similar items were loaded on various competence domains, such as "analysis of national tests," "leadership and management," "national educational policy," "quality assurance," and "school development." When "agree" and "strongly agree" were aggregated, the scores varied between 51.7 % (law issues) and 67.1 % (analysis of national tests).

The board members were asked to assess their superintendent's competence in important leadership areas, such as ensuring good working conditions for schooling, allocation of resources to the schools, mobilization for school improvement, and school development in general, with the results indicating only a modest level of assessments (variation in positive assessments between 50 and 60 %). Furthermore, when the board members assessed the level of competence among school principals (within their municipality), a further decline is observable. For example, only 32 % of the members in the sample saw their school principals as fairly good in leading school development. Moreover, when the board members were asked to express their perceptions about school principals' loyalty (with conflicting interests about student learning), only 41.5 % of the board members trusted that their school principals would side with the interests of the students. Thus, the latter observation indicates that the level of organizational trust, as seen from the policy sphere, is only modest.

4.7.2   The Municipality's Capacity as School Owner

In the Norwegian policy context, there is a recurrent debate on the municipality structure, with the backdrop being the dispersed structure of 428 municipalities. At the national level, one of the predominant policy discourses raises critical questions about whether or not small municipalities are capable of ensuring good learning conditions for all children, and there is also a question of whether or not small municipalities are capable of recruiting competent teachers due to a perceived lack of attractiveness. Against this backdrop, the Norwegian survey instrument assesses school board members' perceived capacity in two areas, respectively, their home municipality and small municipalities in general. First, a homogenous and large majority of the sample of school board members expressed a view of municipalities, both smaller and larger, as capable of fulfilling their role as school owners. For example, approximately 80 % of the sample falsifies (disagree and strongly disagree) that "our municipality is too small to fulfill the obligations of primary schooling set by the state." A similar disagreement is shown by the statement that "our municipality is too small to ensure good learning conditions for all pupils in the future." Subsequently, a similar portion of approximately 80 % of the sample perceives that "our municipality will also be capable of offering school provisions that are attractive for the choice of the parents in the future."

4.7.3   Summary and Implications

There are three implications that emerge from the data on the school board members' perceptions of capabilities in their municipalities. First, the data portrays a fairly strong self-belief in the municipality's capacity as school owner, both in terms of the level of student achievements and owner capacity, as providers of good conditions for teachers and learners. Second, the school boards express a fairly strong self-efficacy linked to their own competence as local politicians. When it comes to the perceived competence and level of trust of their school principals, there is a visible decline in the perceptions. Over and above this, the data shows a strong self-belief in school ownership capacity. Furthermore, compared to the national discourse, in which small municipalities are seen as problematic in terms of school ownership, the findings of the current study portray a contrasting "counterculture" or deviating policy discourse compared with the national debate.

4.8   Demands of Accountability

The survey instrument asks the school board members in free-form responses about the expectations of their superintendents in terms of what kind of policy targets they will hold the superintendent accountable for. Prioritized tasks that the board feels that they should hold the superintendents responsible for are, for example:

• Student achievements in national tests
• Reaching budget targets
• Monitoring school results and quality indicators
• Producing the quality report

When it comes to the issues that the board members feel that the superintendent should hold the school principals responsible for, a softer language is visible in the bulk of free-form expressions, such as:

• Transparency in all sides of schooling
• Closing the gap between the budget and real costs
• Ensuring good working conditions for teachers and students
• Ensuring good learning conditions for students

The free-form answers cluster and cohere around a set of demands that will hold the superintendent accountable for student school quality in terms of an appropriate level of student achievements. Moreover, they do *not* expect the school superintendents to hold their respective principals accountable for these targets. In contrast, they first and foremost expect the school principals to be accountable for good working conditions and motivational conditions for their teachers. Hence, there is a significantly softer rhetoric when it comes to the expectations for school principals as expressed by the school board members in the sample.

4.9   Forecasting

There are three parties in the national quality assurance system in Norway: the state department, the regional educational governors, and the municipalities. Notably, the operating level of the quality report system itself is the municipality, which means that the municipal school administration collects data from the school level and aggregates the sources into the report, which in the final round are submitted to the educational governor in each of the 19 regional counties. Nevertheless, a certain amounts of templates and tools are available (linked to several national register databases) for producing the yearly quality report, as the individual municipality enjoys some degree of freedom to include target issues in accordance with local priorities. Lastly, the report then forms the basis of supervisory practices for the yearly meeting with the municipality administration; however, this is significantly influenced by the choices made by the municipalities.

   The school board members were asked to express in their own words their experiences with the Norwegian quality assurance system in terms of the supervision from the state governor in relation to the yearly quality report. In brief, the respondents split into two "camps" with regard to their experiences and perceptions. The first group perceives this arrangement as increased state governance in which the state lays down the premises of local approaches to quality assurance, and they express different categories of negative perceptions. Within this group is also a subgroup that sees this arrangement as a case of the bureaucratization of local school management. The more visible group of school board members express that this is a useful arrangement that enables local school politicians to set quality issues on the agenda based on performance indicators. Despite significant within-group variation in the responses, a number of members also perceive that they enjoy many degrees of freedom in the construction of the quality report, and they also perceive the supervision meeting and school inspections setup by the governor as fruitful.

4.10   Summary and Concluding Remarks

Three trends are visible in the Norwegian policy landscape. First of all, an implication of the current educational legislation, national curriculum, and the dominant discourse is a national assessment system that lays down premises for school governing adapted to fit PISA as the educational "benchmark." Second and nested within this landscape, the state has strengthened its steering core towards municipalities, schools, and teachers through a large body of standardized performance indicators and national tests, in which results are made publicly available for media and stakeholders. Thus, a combinative model of steering and indirect steering, often labeled hard and soft governance (Moos 2009), has been implemented. The third trend is a decentralization of the responsibilities and degrees of freedom (in regulative terms) to municipalities as school owners, in which the state demands

that the municipality sector act as an implementation center of reform and quality assurance. As such, there is a series of tensions and paradoxes inherent in this current governance regime.

The Norwegian school board study reveals a relatively potent layer of local politicians with education as policy specialism. The members of the sample are active and fairly knowledgeable local politicians with a clear motivation structure linked to school improvement and educational policy. They also see themselves and the municipal administration as fairly competent in educational matters. When task preferences, policy preferences, and policy processes (information acquisition, agenda setting, and openness for stakeholders) are investigated, we infer that the school board in Norway is typically tightly coupled to the dominant policy coalition, as well as the administrative and organizational sphere of the municipality. From this perspective, the board members also perceive a high level of influence towards these spheres. Shifting towards schools, school principals, and school professionals, the image emerging from the data portrays a pattern of *decoupling* that is manifest in very few direct communicative linkages towards schools. In terms of political agenda setting, pedagogical issues, local curriculum, and assessment models are also typically low scorers and close to absent when board members specify their tasks and priorities. In addition, the school boards assess their influence towards schools as relatively low, with also only a modest level of organizational trust towards school principals. When shifting the perspective in reverse by asking board members about stakeholder influence, the same pattern is visible: The administrative corpus exerts a high influence, whereas teachers, teacher unions, and parents are absent in this part of the policy process.

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