

## Chapter 5

# School Boards in Sweden

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**Abstract** The school law has strengthened the rights for the pupils and parents not only through the possibility to choose the school but also to test decisions taken by the law in court. The state inspection has a great number of possibilities to act against schools that don't fulfill the law.

When the principal needed support, they gave their demands to the school owner. We call this "under-pressure". Often the demands are about resources. These negotiations affect the relations between the principal and the school owner, as well as between principals, teachers, and parents who have often been involved.

The strong and direct state regulation of the schools, together with a separate system for the allocation of money between states and municipalities, seems to have strengthened the relation between the state and the school and weakened the relation between the schools and the municipality (Nihlfors E, Johansson O, Rektor – en stark länk i styrningen av skolan [The school principal-a strong linkage in school governing]. SNS Förlag, Stockholm, 2013).

At the same time, well-educated, dedicated board members with an interest in education work as spare-time politicians and want to make a difference. The communication with the principals is not frequent, and they heavily rely on the information from the superintendent. Also the board members look to the national level and trust the state inspection more than they trust their own evaluations.

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## 5.1 National Policy Meets Local Implementation Structures

This chapter focuses on the Swedish school boards and their role and function as active parts of the governing chain for schools. Our focus is on finding explanations to differences between school boards in their understanding of their tasks to improve and sustain school improvement. How do school boards understand their function in the local educational system, and do they see two sides of the system: one political and one administrative?

The governing system of the Swedish school system has changed several times since the first school board for all municipality schools was introduced in 1958. At that time, both school boards and superintendents were regulated by the Education Act (Nihlfors 2003). From 1991 and onward, the municipality council decide themselves about their organization concerning political boards.

The last two decades of governmental control can be characterized by two trends working side by side and yet contradicting each other. Decentralization, deregulation, and an increased local independency were rhetorically strengthened in the reform era of the early 1990s. This was paired by recentralization and increased national control from the end of the 1990s onward. The Swedish context can also be characterized by competition. The policy stream has been intense in order to strengthen the pupil's results or to make Sweden competitive on the market in the future.

Many reforms over the last decades have been directed directly at the school level. This placed strong pressure on the principals and on the school owner/municipality to give the best prerequisites to the professionals to fulfill the national goals set by the Education Act and the curricula. In the Education the state regulates the work in the school sector of Sweden. The law clarifies the division between politicians and professionals when it comes to responsibility and accountability (Nihlfors and Johansson 2013). The result from the 2012 PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) study has started an intensive debate about how schools are governed on the local level.

### 5.1.1 National Actors in the Governing System

The Swedish school system, which operates on a national level with the government and parliament (*Riksdag*), makes basic decisions in relation to content through binding laws, regulations for the schools, and the school districts. The most important ones are school laws, national curricula, and syllabuses for different subjects; decisions concerning teacher training; teacher qualifications; and a compulsory principal training program for all newly appointed principals (Boström and Lundmark 2012).

The National Agency for Education (NAE) is the central administrative authority for the public school system, publicly organized preschooling, school-age childcare, and adult education. NAE shall provide support for the implementation of new national

reforms but also set up frameworks and guidelines regarding how education is to be provided and assessed with the aid of syllabuses and subject plans, knowledge requirements and tests, as well as general guidelines. NAE is also responsible for the national system for assessing knowledge. Together with universities, they develop national tests and assessment guides for teachers to ensure that pupils receive equivalent assessments. NAE takes part in international studies to benchmark the Swedish education system and compare it with other countries.

There is another national agency in the governing chain: the Swedish State School Inspection (SSI). This agency has supervisory responsibility for preschooling, school-age childcare, schooling, and adult education. This means that the agency checks that the municipalities and independent school owners comply with the legislation and other provisions applicable to their activities. SSI is also responsible for approving applications and grants for independent schools.

There are some other national agencies, but the two previously mentioned are the most central for policy implementation. To understand the transformation of legal norms into professional action at a local level, an analysis is needed of how national guidelines and national inspections of local authorities are effecting the implementation of legal standards.

We see this trend of using bypass as a way for the state to interfere in local administrative and political structures. Going more or less directly to the schools can be seen as a bypass operation where the municipality level is more or less left out. This bypass contains support directly to the schools, which can then create an “under pressure” from the schools to the school board. One example is national financial support to specific teacher categories within the municipality. As the municipality is in charge of salaries, the state with this bypass action interferes in the salary structure of teachers within the municipality.

### ***5.1.2 Municipalities, County Councils, and Regions***

Sweden is divided into 290 municipalities and 20 county councils, each with a degree of autonomy. Local self-government and the right to levy taxes are stipulated in the Instrument of Government, one of the four pillars of the Swedish Constitution (Myrlund 2011).

The municipality is governed by elected people. There are approximately 46,000 political assignments in the municipalities and 3,500 political assignments in the 20 county councils and regions. This means that 1 % of the adult population in Sweden holds a political assignment in a municipality or county council.

Swedish citizens aged 18 or over has the right to vote in elections to the parliament, municipal, and county councils. Citizens of foreign origin living in Sweden can vote for the local elections in the municipality and county. The electoral system is proportional, which means that the proportion of seats that parties may have is largely the same as the percentage of votes that the party received. To participate in the distribution of seats in the parliament, a party must receive at least 4 % of the valid

votes in the whole country. In the county council election, 3 % of the valid votes in the county are required, and for the municipal councils, there is no percentage barrier.

The municipality council can be viewed as the parliament of the municipality. They make decisions about taxes, allocate resources, decide which political boards are needed, and appoint who shall audit the work in the municipality. The municipality board can be viewed as the government of the municipality and conducts the implementation of the council's decisions and is responsible for having a balanced budget. The politicians in the municipal board are the most influential in each party and an implication of that is that the board's recommendations for the council are very central. In many municipalities, the chairperson of the school board is a member of both the municipality council and board.

The majority of municipalities also have other boards pertinent to different administrative areas, and one of these is often the school board. The appointed members of the school board are all politicians and are organized with a chairperson from the political majority in the council and one or two vice chairs from other political parties. Because each municipality has many boards with ten to 15 members and substitute members, all cannot be members of the municipal council. There are around 470 school boards in the 290 municipalities. Most school boards have a central school office serving them and the head is often called superintendent. We find different names both of the school boards and the superintendent. This reflects what responsibilities they have. It can be preschool, compulsory school, and also libraries and sport facilities. The combinations of tasks are greater in smaller municipalities.

The school board and the superintendent are not mentioned in the school law, but they are both appointed by the municipal council and seen as the school owner representatives. There is, in some municipalities, one more decision level between the superintendent and the principals and subdistrict heads, and their task is to organize and support a part of the school district.

### ***5.1.3 Local Boards of Parents***

To enhance parent involvement in municipal schools and to vitalize local democracy, it was proposed that municipalities should be permitted to delegate decision-making authority previously held by district school boards and school principals to local school boards that had a parent majority. This idea was introduced by a national committee first and eventually decided upon by the parliament that the boards should be allowed a trial period. Although local school boards are now entering their 16th year on trial and have become an institutionalized part of the system, parents are no longer allowed to be in the majority within the local school board. The National Assembly passed a law giving the rights to municipal councils to introduce local school boards at the school site with parents involved, but it is the district school board that, in collaboration with individual schools, decides on the functions to be delegated. Initially, municipalities were allowed to delegate authority on areas such as culture and sports, in-service professional development of school staff, and cooperation between the school and homes—but not regarding

the use of the school's budget or pedagogical planning. However, with the enactment of the new Education Act, local school boards are regulated as a special case of local self-management, without specific guidelines about what the boards are allowed to do (Holmgren et al. 2012). The new Education Act references the Local Government Act, which only specifies the kinds of decisions that the district boards are *not* allowed to delegate. This includes decisions that concern them, “goals, focus, scope, and quality of the activities,” as well as authority in relation to individuals (e.g., the hiring of staff or children in need of special support).

## 5.2 The Local School Board

From the beginning of the 1990s, an intense stream of policy reforms have affected the schools in different ways. The purpose of new laws and regulations has, from the national political level, been aimed at improving pupil's results. Whether national decisions are perceived as positive reforms or as new control mechanisms depends to some extent on how much support the intentions behind the decisions have—in other words, how important these intentions are, especially among those responsible for the implementation. Lundquist's (1992) classic governance model will serve as a basis for further discussion here. He defines two distinct roles in politics: the policy-maker role and the implementer role. Or, as Lindensjö and Lundgren (2000) put it, this is the difference between the formulation and realization arenas. The direct control is coupled with more or less clear rules of what is to be implemented, while the indirect concerns the conditions for doing so, for example, allocating resources for implementation. In this context, it is important to point out that the implementation level is often influenced by several different processes of change, including the mediation arena.

The vast number of new regulations makes it difficult to discern which effects come from what decision. This difficulty may also be exacerbated by the fact that institutions find themselves at different stages of implementation. Lack of understanding on the local level can also affect implementation. During the realization of a decision, there is a possibility, sometimes even a duty, for different levels to interpret the intent of the political decision to reformulate it in order to make it possible to implement the decision in the prevailing context.

Since the middle of the 1990s, Sweden has had a dual school system with both independent or free schools and public schools. Pupils and parents have the possibility to choose between different municipality schools and independent schools. Both school forms are financed with tax money from the state and municipality and are not allowed to take fees from the pupils. Independent schools must have an official school owner, and they often organize themselves with board functions equivalent to district school boards. There are a variety of different association forms and the independent school boards can differ a lot in size and importance. The effects vary between different parts of the country; where there are many independent schools, the changes in the number and size of public schools have been visible (Holmgren et al. 2013).

This chapter concentrates on the elected boards in the municipalities and is based on a national study of all Swedish school board members from 2012, with a respondent rate of 46 %. Grounded on a response rate analysis, we find the material valid. This study is part of a bigger project<sup>1</sup> including surveys to chairpersons, board members, superintendents, and principals in all Swedish municipalities and is comprised of interviews with these people in 12 municipalities/school districts.

When we ask the school board members about the importance of different aspects of the policy streams for improved education, we discover an interesting picture. When we asked which statement they considered to be important reasons for schooling, almost three-quarters of them (74 %) say that it is important that all children have the chance to develop as much as they can. In second place, with 56 %, the statement was that it is important to teach children about the democratic principles of society. And 40 % of the board members believe that it is important to teach about the importance of Sweden being active within the international arena. The rest of the statements that were mentioned at around 25 % each or less are it is important for the well-being of the society and it is important to help young people to have good working prospects and the possibility of social mobility. Only 15 % of the school board members believe that education is important in reaching a higher understanding of different cultures.

### 5.3 The Demography of the School Boards

In this section, we will describe the school board member's characteristics as well as internal similarities and differences within the given sample of school districts. Within the material responses from 1,599 board members, 49 % were from men and 51 % were from women. The average age was 51 years old; 25 % of them were younger than 40 years of age and 25 % were older than 60 years. There are no persistent gender differences related to age.

More than 60 % have a post-upper secondary school education, including higher education, with 3 % more women than men possessing a higher education. The group that only has a compulsory education is 5 %. Another big group (31 %) has upper secondary school as their highest formal education.

#### 5.3.1 *Which Position Do the Members Have on the Labor Market?*

One-fifth of the members of the board are not employed, 14 % are pensioners, 4 % are still studying, and a small percentage of them (4 %) have no work position for the moment. A large group is employed within the public sector (37 %), including

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<sup>1</sup>When National Policy meets Local Implementation Structures, SRC 2009–2013.

13 % working in education and 7 % working in the health sector. In the private sector, 13 % are business owners, 11 % are employed in the private service sector, and 8 % are employed in the industry sector. Another 2 % are active in the nonprofit sector working for political parties, unions, or the church.

### ***5.3.2 How Engaged Are These Members in Politics?***

Of the respondents, 16 % are vice chairpersons, 13 % are chairs of the school boards, and 1 % are substitute members of the board. For 26 % of them, the school board is their only political assignment. But many of the others have more than one assignment: 66 % have a seat in the municipal council and 26 % are assigned to a seat in the municipal board, which is the government of the municipality. One-tenth of them have a seat in the municipality companies and 23 % are also members of one or two other sector boards. School politicians in Sweden can be characterized as a well-qualified group.

### ***5.3.3 Reason for Accepting to Be a Member of the School Board?***

It is very clear that the absolute majority say that they wanted to assign as they are interested and engaged, see its importance, etc., in education. Many see themselves as knowledgeable and therefore able to make a difference. A few highlight political reasons, saying that the education board is a good way into local political work.

The party distribution in our project has an acceptable adjustment to party distributions within school boards in the different school districts within the country. There is no possibility to compare the election distribution in each school district with our data, but it is important to know that on the local level, more often than not, Sweden does not have a clear party cleavage between the bourgeoisie and socialist parties. Most of the times, the local politics is very pragmatic. In about 34 % of the school boards, there is a socialist majority, in 35 % there is a bourgeoisie majority, and within the remaining boards, 31 % are parties working together. In Sweden, we have eight parties on a national level, and these can be divided into three groups: the socialists (three parties), the bourgeoisie (four parties), and the nationalistic (one party). On local politics, it is also possible that a local party is represented in the municipality council.

The people in the school boards must be seen as important local politicians and that they consider the school board to be an important governing body of the school sector. They have been active within politics for on average of 8 years—25 % has been in politics for 4 years and 25 % have more than 15 years of experience. On average, they have been members of the school board for 3 years, i.e., 53 % of them were appointed to their school board after the last election in 2010 and another 25 %

have 6 years or more on the school board. There are no persistent gender differences related to time in politics or time on the school board. We have checked the variables in this section for size of the municipality and cannot find any clear variation in relation to municipality size.

## 5.4 The School Board as an Institution

One important question is what role the school board has in the local implementation process for national policy and in the local quality assurance process. The role is very much decided and elaborated in relation to the quality and interest from the board members. Even political and ideological disagreements and conflicts can have an impact on how the boards work. The perception of empowerment among the board members has been measured by two questions. One concerns how they see the school board's possibility of making important decisions, and the other relates to the influence of the school board on education in general within the school district.

A majority of the members on the school board think that the board can make strategic priorities for the school sector. On a six-grade scale (where 1 = totally disagree and 6 = totally agree), 54 % answered 5 or 6. Fifty-four percent of the board members think that they can influence the way that decisions are formulated. A little over half of the members (52 %) also give the board the power to make economic priorities that are important to schools, and to a little lower extent (39 %), they accept as true the fact that the school board has an influence on the way the school decides on their priorities (Table 5.1).

We find a small, but consistent, difference between men and women. Men are not using *agree totally* as frequently as women. If we also accept a 4 on the six-grade scale as a positive answer, we find that almost three-quarters of the members of the board feel empowered in their work as board members. It is also very clear from the tables that the chairs of the school boards have a much more positive view when it comes to decisions related to strategic priorities and their own influence on the board's decisions. But when it comes to the degree of impact on schools' agendas and priorities, they rank that they have higher impact than board members. The analysis reported reveals that they are not totally convinced or trust that their

**Table 5.1** School board members' and chairs' view on their power—highly agree, values 5 and 6

	The board can make strategic priorities	As a member, one can influence the decisions made by the board	I feel that the board has an impact on the schools' agenda/priorities	I feel that the board can make economic priorities that are important to schools
Board members	54 %	55 %	39 %	52 %
Chair	76 %	96 %	56 %	64 %
Total respondents	807	587	825	773



**Table 5.2** Difference between chairs and board members on different important items—highly agree, values 5 and 6

	Board (%)	Chair (%)	Total number of respondents
The board's work is important for the school's development in our municipality	75	88	1,113
The municipality board takes the views of the school board into account in matters relating to education	52	73	770
As a politician, I am treated with respect by the school staff	74	78	1,093
Principals in the municipality have great influence on the board's decisions	30	34	439
The municipality's school administration has a major influence on the board's decisions	52	53	774
The treatment of different school issues is all about choices between different political party options	21	11	305
The school board is good at suggesting solutions to problems in the school sector	32	42	475
The school administration is good at analyzing the national test	34	44	488
I have sufficient competence in relation to the matters dealt with by the school board	60	74	889

decisions have an impact out in the schools, i.e., they are not sure if they can influence the principal's work at the different schools.

Our questions regarding the influence of the board on different educational matters display a greater variation in the board members' opinions. More than 70 % of the members agree on the statement that the board's work is of great importance to the schools in the district. And they also, to the same degree, feel well treated and respected by the teachers and principals in the schools. Around 50 % of the board members believe that the municipality board accepts their proposals and takes them under consideration before taking any decisions. Fifty percent also think that the central school office has significantly influenced school matters and that the central office does a good analysis of the national tests that their pupils take.

We also asked about how much influence principals have on the board's decisions. It is of interest that 30 % of the members agree that the principals have a large influence on the board's decisions. The same number of members think that the school board is good in finding solutions to different problems within the school sector. Finally, 60 % believe that they have the competence needed in relation to the challenges the school board has to handle and make decisions about. The chairs of the boards in general answered that they agree (5 or 6) to a higher extent than the board members do (see Table 5.2 above). The one question which stands out is the one where we asked if the treatment of different school issues is about choices between different political party options, where one-fifth of the board agrees and only one-tenth of the chairs agree.

The pattern from Table 5.1 is repeated, meaning that the chairs more often agree when answering our questions. The distance between the members' and chairs'

opinions is not great but shows that chairs judge their importance as being higher than that of the members.

The answers above can also be mirrored with some other questions dealing with the relation between the board members and the principals. Nearly 50 % of the board members don't visit the schools or are a "contact" politician for one or two schools. The other half does visit schools once or twice, sometimes three times every semester. Another difference inside the boards is how much time the different board members, who are "spare-time" politicians, are using to prepare for the board meetings. The chairperson often has more time to use as being the chair—more than double the time compared with an ordinary member. The vice chair falls in between these two.

When we ask the school board members about which critical knowledge they need for mastery of the governing functions, they rank knowledge about local school politics as the number one item, 85 % ranked it a 5 or 6 and at the same level is a good understanding of the municipality budget process ranked, 80 %, and on third place we find another important local understanding according to the school politicians, the working conditions of pupils. First on fourth place, we find the understanding and knowledge about the national school policy process and politics to be 69 %. This is interesting because local connection and relevance becomes very evident in the answers. The other alternative answers are ranked as follows:

The school law	63 %
The principal function according to the law	59 %
The content of the curricula	56 %
The teacher's function according to the law	52 %
The local arrangements for delegation	50 %
Other knowledge	46 %
Administrative law	36 %
Laws related to the workforce	31 %

When we leave the top four, we see that the board members rank other law-related items high, so in that sense they recognize the importance and influence of the state on the local school board. Women, in general, answered *agree totally* more frequently than men but still followed the same ranking. The same trend can be seen if we analyze the chairs' answers: In general, they more frequently respond *agree totally* (5 or 6).

#### ***5.4.1 Where Do They Get Their Information About School Board Questions***

We asked the board members for the five most important sources of information. The number one source is the superintendent, followed closely by the central school administration, i.e., the superintendent's office. Their own political party is

also an important source for information and visits to schools. And as number five, we found the school-based actor's principals, teachers, and pupils. On the same level, the school politicians also mention national and local evaluations and measurements.

The agenda setting for the school board meetings is in 50 % of all cases set by the chairperson and the superintendent. About 25 % of the school board members believe that it is the superintendent in cooperation with the chairperson and 25 % believe it is decided by the executive committee of the school board. How does the decision-making atmosphere in the board relate to conflicts between the parties? Of the board members, 53 % think that the decisions are almost always taken in a unanimous manner and 39 % believe that the other usual way is that the decisions are based on what the political majority in the board supports. But of the board members, only 3 % think the decisions are compromises and the remaining 5 % think that there are no clear decision-making patterns. The chairs think that the decisions almost always (73 %) are taken in a unanimous way.

## 5.5 Important Policy Issues

When the school board members, in an open-ended question, write down their three most important policy questions for their 4-year period on the school board, the following policy areas are mentioned.

The area that comes up most frequently is "goal fulfillment and pupils' results." The second most frequent area is the pupil's right to good education and learning environment without stress. In third place, we find a lot of answers in relation to democratic values and gender equality. In fourth place, they state concerns related to the teachers and principals competencies and ability to create a good learning environment for the pupils. This is linked to their concern for the improvement of pupils' knowledge. In summary, we find a great focus on pupils and their well-being, as well as school results.

We also asked the board members the same question but with the given response alternatives in the end of the questionnaire and asked them to rank the five major objectives of the education.

The analysis of these answers points to the same pattern of important items. On top, we find quality questions and long-term planning, and almost at the same level of ranking, we have pupil-related answers, and in the lower part of the list, we find organizations that are mentioned by 60 % and three other administrative matters that don't seem to be of high priority for the board. We find the frequency of the last item "questions related to individual pupils" mentioned a bit surprising. A political school board should work with long-term policy questions and focus on decisions that can improve the school action by not making decisions about individual pupils. There are no significant differences for gender or position on the board, i.e., chair or board member.

## 5.6 Perception of Educational Capabilities

We have asked the school board members about their view related to different actors' ability to perform in relation to different important tasks, and we only report strongly agree, i.e., 5 and 6 on a six-grade scale. Our first item concerned the capacity of the central school office to lead school improvements. Almost 50 % of the board members think that the office has that capacity. A few more present (54 %) agree that the school administration has the capacity to perform the necessary quality control activities within the school district. They are about equally confident in their view on the superintendent and his/her leadership of the principals in school improvement matters (57 %). More than half (55 %) of the school board members say that there is a great variation between the different principals in regard to their professional competence. When we asked if the principals have the capacity to lead school improvement on their own school, 35 % strongly agreed. But at the same time, the board members believe that the principals see the pupils' learning as something very important (54 %). There are no significant differences for gender or position on the board, i.e., chair or board member.

We also asked board members how they think the principals have implemented one of the new paragraphs in the school law from 2011. Only 39 % think that the principals create good conditions for children in need of special support for their learning. The corresponding figure is even lower for creating good conditions for high achieving pupils (22 %). Our conclusion is that school board members do not have high expectations regarding the different actors in leadership positions within the school district.

School board members' view of the school district is another set of items that we asked for their opinions on. That the school district has attractive schools with programs that are desired by the pupils is something that 53 % of them believe, but the school structure has difficulties in recruiting well-qualified teachers—only 43 % think that the schools can recruit well-qualified teachers. If we go on and look for how they judge the school structure, 40 % say that it is good. But again, when we ask about the pupils, we get another type of answer. We asked, “are the variation of outcome in children's learning between different schools acceptable?” and only 21 % responded that this was ok. When the same question was asked in relation to the teachers, we got the same low-level answer of 21 %. There is still some trust in the school system as 39 % think that their school district has a good school culture that promotes teaching and learning. There are no significant differences related to gender or position on the board, i.e., chair or board member.

Checking that statement through a question of how the school results has developed in the school district, we find that almost 48 % say that the results have improved, 27 % say that they have gone down, and another 22 % say that the results have remained the same.

From Table 5.3 below, we can see that there is not a perfect match. The question is why. In general, the board members do not seem to have a good understanding of

**Table 5.3** How would you characterize the development of school results in your municipality? Change in merit values between 2009 and 2011 (row percentage in each category)

Statement: "The school in our district has:"

Merit value change 2009–2011	Improved greatly in terms of pupil results	Improved slightly in terms of pupil results	Stable pupils results	Deteriorated somewhat in terms of pupil results	Deteriorated greatly in terms of pupil results	Do not know	Total
Stable low	3 %	37 %	21 %	29 %	8 %	2 %	344
Stable mean	8 %	39 %	22 %	24 %	6 %	2 %	637
Stable high	14 %	45 %	23 %	13 %	2 %	3 %	362
Total	111	533	296	300	70	33	1,343

the situation in the school district. The reason for that can be that the superintendent doesn't offer clear information to the board, but it can also be the case that they express a general opinion related to their political party's opinion.

Table 5.3 clearly shows that there is a low understanding of how the merit values in the school district have developed over the last 3 years among the school board politicians. In school districts where the merit values have gone downhill still 40 % of the politicians think that they have improved. The same trend of not knowing the development of the merit value can be seen among school districts where merit values have improved and 38 % of politicians think that the pupil outcomes are stable or have deteriorated. Among the stable school districts, 47 % of the politicians believe that the results have improved.

Finally, under this section, we focused on quality evaluations. "Does the school board get a good picture of the schools quality from their own quality reports to the board?" About 45 % agree that the quality report gives the board a good understanding of the school quality. Does this report lead to decisions of the board in asking for improvements? In most cases, only 39 % of the board members say they do. A majority of the board members (55 %) think that the state school inspection offers a reliable picture of the school district schools in their inspection reports. When the same question concerns only the individual schools, 50 % of the board members think that it is the case. The school board makes 66 % of the inspected case decisions because of the school inspection reports and asks the schools to improve. That the principal's quality work can be helped by the school inspection reports is the opinion held by 61 % of the board members. That the school inspection can use sanctions on school owners if the critic is not taken cared of within the time limits given is the opinion of 77 % of the board members. Only 32 % think it is right that the inspection only writes in their inspection reports about the problematic conditions that they find and are not supporting what is good within the schools. There were no significant differences for gender or position on the board, i.e., chair or board member.

## 5.7 Demands of Accountability

In two open-ended questions, we asked which of the three most important issues the board should review in monitoring superintendents' work and the three most important issues that the superintendents should use to monitor the principals. Two key areas appear in their answers to both these questions: budget and pupil results. The difference appears on the third position. The board wants the superintendent to both explain the reasons behind decisions taken on the board and take responsibility for these being implemented. After budget and pupil results, the board wants the superintendent to make sure that the principles work toward improved education results and a good learning environment for both pupils and teachers (usually the board members do not specify how this is to be achieved or what aspect of the issue they are referring to).

## 5.8 Country-Specific Observations

In the Swedish system, it is often argued that there is a tension between the state and the local school districts. When asked about if they felt any tension between the local school districts and the state, 53 % agreed and 25 % disagreed of the board members and the remaining group does not know how to answer.

As we can see in Table 5.4, the chair more frequently than the board experiences a conflict between the municipality and the state. We can also see that males, more frequently than females, experience a conflict between the local and state level. Women more frequently were not sure if they perceived a conflict. In response to an open-ended question, the school board members expressed their views about the conflict. Most of the answers were related to the fact that the government developed new laws and regulations, but there was no money for the implementation of the new policies.

One other way to analyze this tension is to look for the school board members' opinions related to their future roles. When asked about what will happen with the boards' influence over the schools in the school district, half of them (50 %) think that there will be no difference and 37 % believe that they will have greater influence over the schools. When the same question was asked in relation to the

**Table 5.4** Do you think that in the current situation, there are tensions between the state and the municipality when it comes to education policy (column percentage in each category)?

	Board	Chair	Male	Female
Yes	54 %	64 %	60 %	47 %
No	25 %	25 %	25 %	25 %
Don't know	22 %	11 %	16 %	28 %
Total <i>N</i>	1,323	175	662	662

superintendent, 33 % think their power over the superintendent will increase and 57 % think that it will stay the same. The new school law mentions the principal in five times as many paragraphs as in the old one, and these school board members have been informed of because 61 % of them believe that the principals will get increased responsibility. Forty-two percent also say that the principal will have more power in relation to the superintendent, but at the same time, 30 % of the board members think that the superintendent position will increase in importance. When we asked that question in relation to the principal, 15 % think their overall power will be less, 22 % believe that the control over principals will increase, and 55 % think that there will be no change. With the superintendent's relation to the board, 72 % think that it will remain the same but 15 % think that the superintendent will have more discretion.

The school board members anticipate a great change in the demands that will come from pupils and parents on having the right to influence their education. They think this will increase with 63 % for the children and 57 % for their parents. This is an interesting development and is in line with the school board members' interest for the school quality in other questions. Women tend to answer "do not know" more frequently than men who seem to think that it will stay the same as now.

Finally, the boards were asked what issues they thought should be taken when a school, for several years, underachieved in relation to expected grade results. The most common answer (nearly 50 %) suggested to start with an analysis of what the problem actually is and thereafter take action, or as one board member put it, analysis direct, action set and goal follow up. Two common groups of answers, even if the groups are small (under 20 %), are to change the leadership and invest in different types of development, mostly in-service training for teachers.

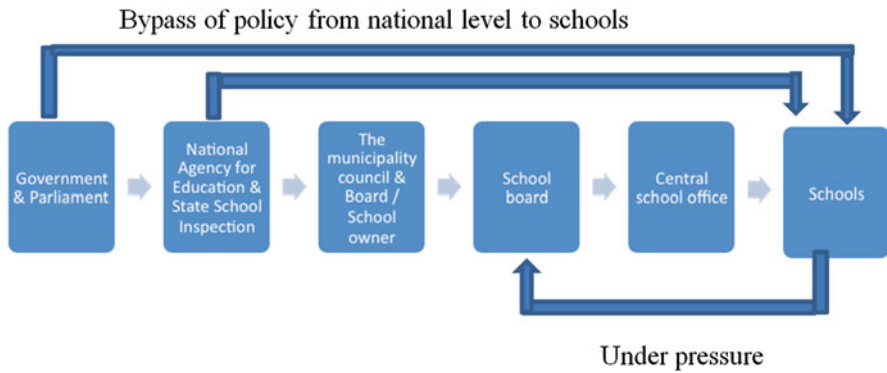
## 5.9 Concluding Remarks

Many decisions that previously were handled at the national level are today made by the municipalities, but the state still has strong control over the school sector (Hudson 2007; Lundahl 2005; Segerholm 2009). There are several mechanisms through which the state learns about the characteristics and behavior of different actors: screening, contract design, reporting requirements, and oversight (Holmgren et al. 2013).

Some of the regulations are direct to the school level and bypass the school owners.

The school law has strengthened the rights for the pupils and parents not only through the possibility to choose the school but also to test decisions taken by the law in court. The state inspection has a great number of possibilities to act against schools that don't fulfill the law.

When the principal needed support, they gave their demands to the school owner. We call this "under pressure" (see Fig. 5.1). Often the demands are about resources.



**Fig. 5.1** The governing chain with a “bypass” from government/agencies to school and “under pressure” from schools to local political level/school board

These negotiations affect the relations between the principal and the school owner, as well as between principals, teachers, and parents who have often been involved.

The strong and direct state regulation of the schools, together with a separate system for the allocation of money between states and municipalities, seems to have strengthened the relation between the state and the school and weakened the relation between the schools and the municipality (Nihlfors and Johansson 2013).

At the same time, well-educated, dedicated board members with an interest in education work as spare-time politicians and want to make a difference. The communication with the principals is not frequent, and they heavily rely on the information from the superintendent. Also the board members look to the national level and trust the state inspection more than they trust their own evaluations.

How, and if, quality in education does affect a movement from equality to a stronger controlled quality, and if this affects the democratic role in governance of schools, the boards’ work, and the balance between politicians and professionals is an empirical question.

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