ABSTRACT

While research on professionalism in state legislatures has been substantial, research on professionalism has ignored legislative bodies in local government, such as city councils and school boards. Utilizing detailed school district-level data and an original survey of school board members in 210 school districts in California, we develop measures of professionalism in the local government context. We then use these measures to examine which characteristics of school districts are associated with greater professionalization. Consistent with findings in the state politics literature, we find that districts with greater resources and more heterogeneous environments exhibit higher degrees of professionalism than other districts.

Substantial research has investigated legislative professionalism at the state and national levels. The literature, however, largely ignores professionalism in “local legislatures,” such as city councils and school boards, which are responsible for policy-setting for and oversight of a large number of public services. The important role of professionalism in understanding state legislative behavior and legislative outcomes suggests that this omission is significant. Professionalized state legislatures are able to spend more time developing legislation, deliberating policy alternatives, and interacting with other political bodies and their constituents (Rosenthal, 1996). They bring more expertise to the policy process (Squire, 2007). By some measures, such as congruence between public opinion and legislative outputs, they might also create more responsive policies (Maestas, 2000). The question of whether professionalism reaps similar rewards at the local level is open.

This paper argues that the study of professionalism should not be confined to state legislatures. Like state legislatures, local legislatures vary with respect to the kinds of
resources—legislative salaries, time, and support staff—that are commonly used to capture professionalism. Also as with state legislatures, it is reasonable to hypothesize that these resources might impact local legislative operations (Freeman & Hedlund, 1993; Reed & Schansberg, 1996) or policy outputs (Squire, 1998). We might also suspect that professionalism affects local decision-making activity in ways that improve the efficiency or responsiveness of local government.

Yet before research can advance to examining a link between local legislative professionalism and these kinds of outcomes, the question of what legislative professionalism means at the local level must be considered. This question is not a trivial one. Legislative structures, operations, and the nature of deliberation are different at the local level, e.g., weak or nonexistent committee systems, an absence of bicameralism, a focus on narrower sets of issues, fewer opportunities for public debate (Briffault, 2003). Moreover, these differences make the measurement of professionalism within the framework employed in state-level studies challenging. For example, common components of state professionalism indexes, such as session length, may not have obvious application for local councils or boards, which typically meet at regular intervals year-round.

The goal of this study is to define and operationalize local legislative professionalism within the context of these challenges. Drawing on the long literature on professionalism in state assemblies, we develop measures of Mooney’s (1994, 70-71) conceptualization of professionalism as resources that enhance the capacity of legislature “to perform its role in the policymaking process with an expertise, seriousness, and effort comparable to that of other actors in the process” in the context of decision-making at the local level. We then draw on administrative data and responses to an original survey of school board members in California to measure professionalism in 210 local school districts. Using these measures, we examine the distribution of professionalism across institutional characteristics and compare our findings to those on predictors of professionalism in state legislatures.
LEGISLATIVE PROFESSIONALISM

Legislative professionalism concerns resources expended to increase legislative engagement with the policy process, or to enhance the ability of legislators to increase their effectiveness as policymakers and leaders (Owings & Borck, 2000). At the extreme, the most professional legislatures would have “unlimited legislative sessions, superior staff resources, and sufficient pay” for them to fully specialize in the job of legislating (Squire, 2007). Being more professional is also thought to give legislators more control and independence from other decision-making actors (Rosenthal, 1993; Clynch & Lauth, 1991; Berkman, 2001). This control and independence comes from legislators’ enhanced expertise, more focused attention, and greater capacity for deliberation (Thompson & Moncrief, 1992).

The proper measurement of professionalism has received considerable attention as researchers have studied its causes and effects at the state level. Variation in how the concept is operationalized has led different scholars to draw different conclusions about professionalism across empirical studies (LeLoup, 1978). According to Mooney (1994), early studies of professionalism used either categories (e.g., grouping states by high, medium, or low professionalism) or some single proxy variable, such as total expenditures on the legislature, as a surrogate. As Mooney explains, both are problematic. Categorical measures, while appealing in their simplicity, are inadequate because of the continuous nature of the underlying construct. Single proxy variables, while readily available, “seriously underrepresent the multidimensional nature of professionalism” (71).

In response to these kinds of concerns, a common measurement approach in the literature has been the creation of professionalism indexes. Grumm (1971) offered the first of these by combining legislators’ pay, total session length, expenditures on legislative operations, staff services, and number of bills introduced, a procedure replicated (with only slight tweaking) by Morehouse (1983). One criticism of this approach is that it combines theoretically reasonable
measures of professionalism (e.g., session length) with a measure—number of bills—that is more clearly an output measure (Mooney, 1994); later index measures (e.g., Bowman & Kearney, 1988; Squire, 1992) carefully avoided this conflation. Yet the Grumm and Morehouse indexes, which utilize factor analysis to identify the latent professionalism construct, have the advantage of presenting a continuous, multidimensional measure.

The other multidimensional approach to the measurement of professionalism that has enjoyed substantial use in the state legislature literature is the Squire index, developed in numerous works by Squire (1992; 1993; 2007). The Squire index focuses on three variables: legislator pay and benefits, total days in session, and amount of legislative staff. Rather than use factor analysis, the Squire index benchmarks state legislatures to Congress, which is taken, uncontroversially, to be the most professional legislature. More professional states have higher proportions of legislative resources relative to Congress, while less professional states have lower proportions.

Despite the differences in the approaches taken by Grumm (1971) and Squire (1992), the two index measures correlate very highly (Mooney, 1994), suggesting that they are capturing the same construct. This close relationship is unsurprising given the similarity in the variables used to build the two measures. Both indexes, and most others that have followed (see Squire, 2007), have primarily included measures of Squire’s (1992) three components, suggesting a consensus within the literature about the importance of these areas—pay, time, staff resources—in capturing what it means for a legislative body to be professional.

Conceptually, the first component—higher legislative salaries and benefits—improves legislative capacity in several ways. Higher pay provides incentives for sitting members to continue serving (Eliassen & Pedersen, 1978; King, 2000). The result of lengthening terms in office is a more experienced body. Moreover, paid legislators are more able to set aside their regular occupations to focus on their legislative responsibilities, spending more time on policy formation and evaluation (Squire, 2007). Salaries and other benefits also raise the attractiveness
of legislative work, potentially opening up service opportunities to a wider set of qualified individuals (Squire, 1992). Consistent with this expectation, a quasi-experimental study of local councilmembers in Brazil found that higher salaries attracted better-qualified candidates to run for office (Ferraz & Finan, 2009).

The second component is time. Legislatures that invest greater time in decision-making can engage in more extensive policy development and longer periods of policy deliberation, theoretically improve the quality of legislative outputs (Squire, 2007). Also, spending more time in session allows the legislator to master their skills and become more effective leaders (Bell & Price, 1975), which may increase the long-term effectiveness of the body.

The third component is staff and other legislative resources. Having staff at hand are useful because staff can assist legislators with research on upcoming and existing legislation, are points of contact with constituents, and provide expertise on the policy process. Also, as Squire (2007) notes, “a larger staff base likely improves re-election prospects by enhancing legislators’ ability to provide constituent services” (p. 214). Staff can also improve legislator job satisfaction by reducing the mundane tasks required of legislators.

PROFESSIONALISM AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

The hypothesized outcomes of higher pay, greater time invested, and more access to staff resources are greater decision-making capacity and greater legislative engagement with the policymaking process. Research finds evidence in support of these links, showing that, for example, more professionalized legislatures have more contact with their constituents (Squire, 1993). What is unclear is whether these expectations extend beyond state legislatures. As Squire (2005, 98) notes, “unfortunately, the scholarly study of professionalization and its consequences
is almost exclusively focused on state legislatures,” suggesting that the reason for this lack of clarity is lack of research attention.¹

This inattention persists in spite of evidence that service on many local legislative bodies is—applied the definitions legislature scholars typically employ—an increasingly professional enterprise. For example, in Hess’s (2001) national survey of school board members, 67% of all respondents reported receiving no board salary, but 3.4% (and 7% in districts with 5,000+ students) made at least $10,000. Ten years later, Hess and Meeks (2011) reported that the fraction of board members receiving no pay had declined to 62%, while the fraction receiving at least $10,000 nearly doubled, to 6.3% (and 12% in districts with at least 5,000 students). Time requirements increased as well, with the fraction reporting spending at least 25 hours per month on board work increasing from 31% in 2001 to 42% in 2011.² Moreover, by 2011, Hess and Meeks report that 91% of all boards have access to administrative support, 56% have access to staff to assist with research, and 64% have access to staff to help with analyzing and interpreting student data.³ Likewise, Carol et al.’s (1986) study finds that “increasingly, boards in large systems within politically complex communities are establishing staff positions assigned to the board” to help them cope with the “sheer volume of work” and “become much more involved in day-to-day activities within the school system.” As Kirst and Wirt (2009) note, the difficulty of school board work and the scope of issues they must address have increased substantially in recent decades; boards have necessarily invested in professionalizing—to one degree or another—to meet these demands. Scholars have noticed similar changes in other municipal offices as well. Ehrenhalt (1991) sums up this shift: “Politics is a profession now, not just in

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¹ The remainder of Squire’s statement is “…and not on Congress,” pointing out the low priority scholars have placed on consideration of professionalism at the local level.
² To wit, in 2007, a citizen panel voted to increase the salaries of LA Unified school board members to $46,000, to, according to a 2007 LA Times story, ensure that board members could avoid working other full-time jobs and devote full attention to their board duties (Zahniser, 2007), the same argument typically made for increasing state legislators’ salaries (Squire, 2007).
³ These questions were not asked in the 2001 survey.
Congress, but in many state legislatures and in countless local governments, where a causal part-time commitment used to suffice” (quoted in Banovetz, 1994, p. 320).

To measure local legislative professionalism, research on state legislatures suggests that we should focus on salary, time investment, and staff (Squire, 2005). Before proceeding, it is worth asking whether we would expect these three components to be similarly important at the local level. Like most state legislators, local legislators serve on a part-time basis and typically hold down other employment. As a result, they are likely to be responsive to the incentives and opportunities created by greater pay and benefits for their service (see Ferraz & Finan, 2009). Similarly, the part-time nature of local legislatures suggests that time demands matter, with councils or boards more able to deliberate or evaluate alternatives with more hours devoted to decision-making. Moreover, most local legislatures—both generalist (e.g., city councils) and more specialized (e.g., school boards)—must devote attention to a large variety of policy and administration issues, which suggests that access to staff to assist with research or process input from constituents can enhance expertise and improve information processing. Indeed, studies have found that both how boards use their time and how they use staff to help them get information and conduct analysis are key markers of effectiveness (Carol et al., 1986; Pierce, 2009).

In short, if professionalism means resources that enhance policymaking capacity, there is theoretical potential for this construct to matter for local legislative behavior and outcomes. As a first step towards determining whether local legislative professionalism is useful in explaining aspects of local legislative decision-making, the goal for the remainder of this paper is

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4 In some more professionalized states, such as California, state legislative work more closely approximates the time demands of a full-time job.
5 Obviously, state and local legislatures have important differences along these dimensions. For example, whereas state legislatures are in session over multiple months at a time where legislative activity is focused and concentrated, local legislatures are more likely to serve year round but only hold one or a few meetings per month. For another, their staff resources they do command are likely to be shared with one another or with an executive, such as a city manager or school superintendent, limiting their independence and capacity to interact with constituents. Still, the similarities are enough to suggest to us that salary, time, and staff resources are useful places to start in measuring professionalism at the local level.
to explore whether a meaningful latent professionalism construct can be identified from data on local school boards. We proceed by considering Squire’s (1992; 2007) three components of state legislative professionalism and how they might be applied in the local school board context. Use of Squire’s much-considered components helps establish the face validity of a potential measure. We then draw variables related to these three components out of the data and apply factor analysis, under the assumption that, if local legislative professionalism is a meaningful board trait, then a single factor should explain a large fraction of the variance in the measures. We can then check the relationship between the derived measure and other characteristics of the legislative units (i.e., school districts). Before turning to those analyses, the next section describes the data upon which the study draws.

DATA

Our assessment of local legislative professionalism draws on original survey data from local elected officials—or, more specifically, local school board members—in California. As Moe (2005) notes, California’s heterogeneous population, substantial variation in district sizes and political make-up, and sheer size—it educates approximately 10% of the nation’s students—make it an attractive environment within which to examine local school districts. Like school boards elsewhere, school boards in California are responsible for co-creating—alongside the district superintendent—most aspects of local district policy, including budget allocation, construction of new facilities, and personnel (AUTHOR, 2007; Hess & Meeks, 2011). Despite some popular conceptions, school board policymaking is generally low-conflict and consensus-driven, and most boards report positive working relationships with the superintendent (Carol et al., 1986; AUTHOR, 2010; AUTHOR, 2012).

The survey, which covered a variety of topics related to board operations and decision-making processes, was administered to every member on 222 of California’s 975 school districts in 2006 (N= 1,109). Districts were stratified by size and selected randomly, and the response
rate was 63 percent (N = 695). A full description of the sampling methodology and the weights created to mitigate the effects of sampling and non-response bias, used in the analysis below, is available in AUTHOR (2007).

Board member questionnaires were labeled with a unique identifier, which allows their responses to be linked with administrative data. We match survey responses to data on school districts obtained from the National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data (CCD), which contains information about district location, enrollment size, and student demographics. We also merged in data from the 2000 U.S. Census on district median household income. Finally, we incorporated data on student achievement made publicly available by the California Department of Education (CDE) and utilized detailed data on district expenditures contained in the Standardized Accounting Code Structure (SACS), also provided by CDE. With the exception of Census data, all data come from the 2005-06 academic year to correspond to the administration of the school board member survey.

We average board member responses at the district level. Once missing data are accounted for, most analyses use data from 215 school districts. Descriptive statistics for the explanatory variables used in the regression models are shown in Table 1.

MEASURING LOCAL LEGISLATIVE PROFESSIONALISM

Our measure of local legislative professionalism follows Squire’s (1992) focus on salary, time demands, and staff resources. Below we discuss each of these components and describe how we capture each component using our school board survey and administrative data.8

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6 Response rates varied from board to board. Twenty-five boards had 100% response, while 162 had at least 50% response. The mean board had 3.2 respondents of a possible 5; the median board response was 60%. While 5 is by far the most common board size in California (73% of boards surveyed), board-level response rates were virtually identical for three-, five-, and seven-member boards.
7 Initially we also utilized data on education levels in the district but found that the fraction of adults with a college degree correlated with median income at 0.83, so we dropped this variable from our analysis.
8 For the survey-based measures, intraclass correlation measures were calculated from the individual board member responses to assess reliability. The intraclass correlation for school board members’ estimates of their
Local Legislator Salary and Benefits

Theoretically, legislator compensation provides incentives to serve, increasing the level of experience and expertise in the deliberative body over time. Survey respondents were asked to provide the annual salary they received for their board service. Responses revealed that school board members are paid relatively low salaries. In fact, approximately half of respondents reported receiving no salary at all. The mean (weighted) salary among all respondents was $1,777, but this mean was influenced by an outlying district that pays $18,500 per year. The 75th percentile salary was $2,880; the 90th percentile was $5,040. The standard deviation for board member salaries was $2,854.

Time Demands of Legislative Service

Whereas the idea of legislative salary translates in a straightforward manner from the state to local arena, capturing time demands requires some adjustment. In the state legislative literature, the typical measure of time is session length, the number of days the legislature sits in formal deliberation. At the local level, “session length” has little meaning, since local boards and councils typically meet on a part-time basis throughout the year. Instead, to capture the time devoted to policymaking activities, we utilize data from the survey that ask about the amount of time board members spend each month on their board duties. The survey asks about time allocations using three questions: (1) How many hours each month would you say you spend in district school board meetings, on average? (2) How many hours each month would you say you spend in school board committee meetings, on average? and (3) Besides district board meetings and committee meetings, how many hours each month do you spend on school board meetings and committee meetings, how many hours each month do you spend on school board meetings and committee meetings, how many hours each month do you spend on school board meetings and committee meetings, how many hours each month do you spend on school board meetings and committee meetings, how many hours each month do you spend on school board meetings and committee meetings, how many hours each month do you spend on school board meetings and committee meetings, how many hours each month do you spend on school board meetings and committee meetings, how many hours each month do you spend on school board meetings and committee meetings, how many hours each month do you spend on school board...
business, on average? Mean (median) responses to these three questions were 6.9 (5.8), 2.9 (2.0), and 9.6 (7.2), respectively. On average, board members report spending 19.4 hours per month on all school board business, with a standard deviation of 15.7 and a median of 15.8.

Legislative Staff Resources

Access to staff is an important component of professionalism measures because staff can increase members’ capacity to collect information, enhance expertise, and free up legislative attention from secondary tasks. At the state level, staff resources can be measured via staff size. At the local level, however, staffs dedicated to council or board operations are highly unusual. At best, the council or board may have dedicated administrative assistants or share staff with the city executive or superintendent’s office. Local legislatures might also make use of consultant services to provide them with additional expertise on specific policy decisions as a means for compensating for the lack of staff support.

To capture this aspect of local legislative professionalism, we pulled data on board spending from the SACS financial data base. SACS uses a detailed code structure to identify specific categories of expenditures—spending on school board support is category that districts must report. Within “board spending,” there are also codes for more specific areas such as clerical support, consulting and other board services that may be useful in constructing a professionalism index; unfortunately, however, these more specific areas are optional, so not every district reports board spending at this level of specificity. Thus we use the overall board spending measure as a proxy for staff and resources under the assumption that higher board expenditures can be used to purchase the expertise-enhancing functions that legislative staffs serve. Median spending on board functions is $49,888 but is highly right-skewed; the mean is $102,423. This spending is highly associated with district size (r = 0.78).\textsuperscript{10}

\textsuperscript{10} This figure excludes districts that are extreme outliers with respect to enrollment size.
Other Factors

The idea that professionalism means resources that enhance legislative policymaking capacity led us to look for other measures in the survey data that reflect this idea but do not fit easily into the Squire framework. One such area is training or professional development. Training can be an important policymaking enhancement, particularly for newly elected officials who may lack expertise about governmental procedure, budget development, and other aspects of the policy process. The school board survey asked respondents how many hours of formal training (e.g., workshops or seminars) they had received as part of their board service during the last 12 months. The mean amount of training reported was 14.6 hours, with a standard deviation of 18.6.\(^{11}\)

Survey responses also contained information about board operational procedures that are related to the idea of professionalism. These included whether the board utilized consent calendars to discharge routine business, whether the board conducted annual self-evaluations, and whether the board had formal briefs prepared for its use prior to school board meetings. Each of these was a binary variable indicating whether or not the board members reported usage. With the idea that these procedural characteristics might enhance policymaking capabilities—consent calendars help prevent board attention from being diverted away from important policy discussion, for example—we investigated these variables as possible measures of professionalism as well.

Creating a Scale Measure

Our strategy for combining our measures of various variables ostensibly related to local legislative professionalism is (principal) factor analysis. Factor analysis proceeds by assuming a latent trait (or traits) for which multiple measures are observed. Each measure of the underlying

\(^{11}\) The survey also asked about what specific areas the board members had been trained in, which included ten possible topics (e.g., budgeting, legal issues, strategic planning). However, most school members reported having training in most areas, leaving little meaningful variation for us to use.
trait is assumed to be a function of the trait itself plus error. Factor analysis then uses the correlations among the measures to identify the factor structure (i.e., number of factors) that best fits the data (see Lattin, Carroll, and Green 2002).

Factor analysis is an attractive approach here for several reasons. First, factor analytic methods for creating measures of professionalism have a history in the state legislative professionalism literature (e.g., Grumm 1971). Second, factor analysis and its diagnostics allow us to assess the degree to which legislative professionalism is indeed a meaningful underlying latent trait that can be reliably identified at the local level. Third, with no obvious “ideal professional legislature” to serve as a denominator, a Squire-style index would be difficult to construct for local legislatures.

We proceeded by performing a standard factor analysis (common factor model) on the five proxies for Squire’s (1992) salary, time, and staff components: school board member salary; time reported spent in board meetings, committees, and other business; and spending on board operations. Each of these is a continuous measure. Cronbach’s $\alpha$ for the five items is 0.81, suggesting that the five measures are indeed very closely interrelated and can produce a reliable scale (Nunnally, 1978). According to both the Kaiser criterion and scree test, the five variables loaded onto one latent factor (eigenvalue = 2.37), which is consistent with the assertion that an underlying professionalism trait drives the correlations among the five measures. Table 2 shows the factor loadings for the five variables, which range from 0.54 to 0.81. Given this evidence that professionalism could be identified from the data, we then apply the standard linear scoring method to assign a professionalism score to each school district from these variables. To ease interpretation, we then standardized these scores to be mean 0 and standard deviation 1. Higher scores indicate greater professionalism.12

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12 Because the data set contains one very large school district, we also ran the factor analysis excluding this district to assess the robustness of the results. The factor loadings and reliability measures, with and without the board member training variable, were very close to those shown in Table 2.
As a second analysis, we augmented the five variables used to create the first professionalism factor with the measure of the hours respondents reported being in school board training in the previous year and repeated this analysis. As the right side of Table 2 shows, again the analysis identifies one factor (Eigenvalue = 2.53; Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.80$). The training hours variable loads onto this factor at 0.40, suggesting that including training in a measure of local legislative professionalism may be appropriate. Factors scores were also created from this second factor analysis for each district and standardized.

Finally, we explored the factor structure identified when other procedural measures, such as consent calendars and annual board self-evaluations, were incorporated into the variable list. However, we discovered that these variables did not correlate highly with the other measures because their own variance was quite low; for consent calendars, for example, 94% of boards reported usage. While factor analysis still identified only one latent trait from this full set of variables, the factor loadings for the procedural items were low and the Cronbach’s $\alpha$ measure fell precipitously. Thus we drop this third created factor from our analysis.

**PREDICTING LOCAL LEGISLATIVE PROFESSIONALISM**

The previous section uncovered evidence that legislative professionalism can indeed be identified reliably using a simple set of measures at the local level. To extend this analysis, we next examine which characteristics of school districts and their boards predict a greater score on the factor analytic professionalism scale. To support this examination, we again turn to the state legislative professionalism literature.

Mooney (1995) finds two major characteristics that affect legislative professionalism at the state level: (1) gross state product per capita and (2) heterogeneity of the population within the state. In Mooney’s rendering, professionalism requires funding to support legislative salaries, staff, office space, and extended meetings, so state governments with larger resource bases will be more able to provide professional legislative environments (e.g.,
Dawson & Robinson, 1963; Dye, 1966; Hwang & Gray, 1991). Recontextualizing this finding for the local government setting, we hypothesize that school districts with higher median household incomes will be better able to fund more professionalized school boards. For the same reason, we also consider the association between professionalism and total per-pupil school district expenditures.

The link between professionalism and population heterogeneity comes because “differences in tastes, values, and problem-solving styles may cause more intractable and frequent public problems in heterogeneous populations, thereby increasing the value of a professional, efficient and authoritative public decision-making body” (Mooney, 1995). In other words, professionalism is more likely because it is more useful for handling the more diverse set of problems with which the decision-making body is confronted. We incorporate four measures of heterogeneity in school districts. First, we include a measure of the locale type in which the district is located (urban or rural, with suburban omitted), with the expectation that urban environments will be more heterogeneous and thus more likely to benefit from a more professionalized board. Second, we consider the size of the school district, since enrollment size is likely to proxy for the diversity of policy issues the board encounters and to correlate positively with a greater number of citizen preferences. Third, we include whether or not the district is unified, meaning it runs a school system that spans elementary and secondary schools (as opposed to just one or the other), under the supposition that these more complex administrative units will encounter a larger, more diverse set of policy problems than simpler, non-unified school systems.

Finally, given the longstanding importance and salience of race in education policy and politics (e.g., AUTHOR, 2011; Meier, Stewart & England, 1989), we focus specifically on racial heterogeneity within the district, which is likely to be a marker of the kinds of greater challenges for school board members that Mooney notes. First, we include the percentage of students who are nonwhite in the district. Second, we measure racial diversity more directly by computing of
Blau’s (1977) index of variability for student race characteristics. This racial heterogeneity index is calculated as $1 - \sum p_i^2$, where $p$ is the proportion of students from each race or ethnic group available in the district-level data (white, African American, Hispanic, Asian and other). Perfectly racially homogeneous districts will have an index measure of 0, while a district whose populations are split equally among the five groups will have a measure of 0.80.\textsuperscript{13}

We also consider whether characteristics of the board itself might be correlated with professionalism. Specifically, we consider the size of the board, what fraction of the board was appointed rather than elected, and whether the board is elected in single-member (rather than at-large) elections. These variables were chosen because prior research has suggested that these factors may be correlated with preference heterogeneity among board members themselves (AUTHOR, 2010), which may increase the usefulness of professionalism in the same spirit described by Mooney (1995) with regard to regional heterogeneity.

To test these expectations, we ran ordinary least squares regression models predicting a district’s professionalism score as a function of district characteristics. We ran models for both the simple factor measure and the measure that included board member training hours. We also ran models both with and without board characteristics. Table 3 shows the results, which are quite similar across the four models. Robust standard errors (shown in parentheses) were calculated to account for diagnosed heteroskedasticity.\textsuperscript{14}

The results generally support the hypotheses derived from Mooney’s findings regarding resources and heterogeneity. Districts with greater resource bases, as measured by median household income, are more professional, with each $10,000 in median income associated with an increase on the professionalism scale of about 6% of a standard deviation ($p < 0.01$ across models). Conditional on median income, however, there is no statistical association with per-

\textsuperscript{13} The maximum value for the index is determined by the number of categories, with larger numbers of categories moving the maximum value towards 1.

\textsuperscript{14} The data contain one outlier district in terms of enrollment size and spending. Dropping this district does not change the pattern of results reported in Table 3.
pupil expenditures in any of the models. As predicted, urban school districts are substantially more professionalized than suburban school districts, which are, in turn, more professional than rural districts. In fact, the average urban district will be about half a standard deviation higher on the professionalism scale than the average rural district, all else equal, a large differential. Unified districts are similarly about half a standard deviation higher on the professionalism scale than districts that contain only elementary or secondary schools. Both of these differences are statistically significant at the 0.01 level. Districts with larger student enrollments are also significantly more professional, with each additional 1,000 students in a district associated with an increase of 1.5% of a standard deviation.

Once these factors are taken into account, there is not much evidence of an important relationship between professionalism and district race composition. The coefficient on percent nonwhite is positive but only statistically significant at a conventional level when training is included in the index. The Blau racial heterogeneity index is statistically insignificant in all four models.

While some measures of resources and heterogeneity generally are related to board professionalism, institutional characteristics do not appear to be. The three board-level characteristics included in models 2 and 4 do quite a poor job of predicting local legislative professionalism. The point estimates for each measure are quite small, and none are statistically distinguishable from zero in either model. Also, while the resource and heterogeneity models jointly explain about 65% of the variation in the professionalism measures, board characteristics contribute no additional explanatory power.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

15 This finding suggests to us that school boards serving more nonwhite students are spending more time in training development programs. Since districts with larger minority populations traditionally have underperformed, there may be greater pressure on these boards to seek out additional training opportunities, particularly in the current high-stakes accountability environment.
Professionalism has become an important construct in the state policy and politics literature, but research has given little attention to the possibility that it plays a role in local policy and politics as well. This study takes a step in this direction by identifying a suitable set of variables that can be used to operationalize local legislative professionalism—at least for school districts—and showing that those variables indeed identify a single latent trait with a high degree of reliability. This result is evidence that local professionalism is a meaningful construct underlying an observable set of policy-enhancing behaviors that are comparable to what we have observed in state-level studies. Districts that provide salaries for board members tend also to have board members who invest greater time resources in policymaking and to command greater board resources with which they can enhance their policymaking expertise. Their members also spend more time in board-related training. Together, these measures comprise reasonable proxies for the unobservable professionalism factor that likely drives other policy-enhancing behaviors and institutions in the district. Moreover, the distribution of professionalism with respect to district characteristics such as size and resource level is consistent both with findings from the state legislative professionalism literature and with evidence that the increasing demands placed on school boards in recent decades has pushed many boards to restructure their operations to help them meet those demands (Carol et al., 1986; Kirst & Wirt, 2009).

An immediate question for the scale development in this study is the degree to which it can be generalized, first to school boards in other states and then to other local government institutions, such as city councils. Though it is difficult to say for sure without direct empirical investigation, studies documenting similarities of board structure and composition across states (e.g., Hess, 2002) provide some evidence that the scale would work just as well outside California. Generalizability beyond school boards is less straightforward given institutional

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16 It is possible that the trait we uncover is not professionalism but capacity or investment in expertise, for example. Both of these constructs are closely related to the idea of professionalism (Squire, 1992; Rosenthal, 1996).
variation among school boards, city councils, county boards of supervisors, and so forth, but we suspect that the scale can be applied—perhaps with some tweaking for the specifics of the institution—to these other legislative forms as well. This suspicion derives from the observation that the basic components of compensation, time, and staff resources are likely to be important contributors to legislators’ capacity for effective engagement with the policy process across different types of local legislatures. Knowledge of institutional characteristics such as whether council members or supervisors have access to permanent staff, contract out research services, or draw on the expertise of outside consultants might help improve the measure, but the scale presented here provides a useful framework.

The further development of measures of local legislative professionalism opens the door for researchers to examine how professionalism is linked to policy outputs and processes in the local government context. The state legislative professionalism literature suggests that the implications of professionalism for legislative behavior and outputs could be substantial. The operative word, however, is could. Despite the parallels drawn in this article between local legislatures and their state counterparts, local decision-making boards in fact are quite different from the large, high-visibility, relatively well-resourced and well-staffed deliberative bodies that reside in state capitals. Conceptually, it is not yet clear that professionalism has the same implications for local government bodies as for state legislatures. A central explanation for the importance of the professionalism of the state legislature is that it allows the legislative branch to participate in the policy process at the same level of seriousness or effort as the well-resourced other branches, particularly the executive (Mooney, 1994). Is professionalism just as important at the local level, where the executive (e.g., city manager or superintendent) may in fact be subordinate to—and indeed, can be fired by—the council or board?

This question is one worth asking. But there are good reasons to believe that, despite this imbalance, professionalism is still valuable to local boards. Superintendents have potentially large information advantages in the policymaking process by way of their large staffs and close
contact with the schools implementing those policies. These advantages can lead some boards to become overly reliant on the superintendent in the policy process; one national study of school boards identified superintendent control over policy information as a major difficulty for school board members and an impediment to the board having an independent role in local policy-setting (Carol et al., 1986, p.32). Ostensibly, professionalization can help close the expertise and policymaking capacity gap between the board and executive, which helps explain why the Carol et al. study found that boards in larger, more complex districts increasingly are hiring dedicated staff to help (in part) collect and process information for the board.

Furthermore, evidence suggests that legislative professionalism at the local level may be an important construct for reasons beyond its implications for the legislature-executive relationship. For example, research at the state level shows that professionalism promotes increased responsiveness to the legislature’s constituency (Maestas 2000), reduces legislative turnover (Berry, Berkman, and Schneiderman 2000), and enhances some kinds of legislator diversity (Squire 1992), among other effects. Because the scale of professionalism at the local level is much smaller, we do not know if differences in legislative resources of the magnitudes we uncover are sufficient to affect these kinds of outcomes in a meaningful way. Professionalism may also be relevant to the board’s policy work with other groups, including their engagement with unions in the collective bargaining process that governs teacher policy in many districts (Strunk & Grissom, 2010). Future empirical inquiry is necessary to address these potentially important relationships.

Other findings from the state professionalism literature also provide a useful jumping-off point for future research at the local level. This literature suggests examining the link between local professionalism and the quality or quantity of policy outcomes, the role of interest groups in local decision-making, political ambition, and a variety of other aspects of the local policy process. Also, research should investigate the impact of professionalism on how boards function as a body or how professionalism might have different effects across different types of local
boards. Here we examine a board-manager structure, but other structures (e.g., mayor-council) deserve attention in assessing the generalizability of this research.

Other next steps include testing the extent to which local legislative professionalism varies across different kinds of policymaking bodies. The data for this study come from school boards in California, and whether the results generalize to city councils or even school boards in other states is an important one. Even with the similar structures of school boards from state to state, the context of the policymaking environments can differ substantially, and differences will be even greater for other types of boards. Aside from cross-state data, it would be useful to examine professionalism at the local level using longitudinal data, which would allow for analysis of how local decision-makers might adjust their decision-making capacity in response to changes in the policy environment. Unfortunately, this enterprise is likely to be difficult since longitudinal data on key components of professionalism such as how much time legislators spend on legislative tasks likely can only be obtained from survey data, and systematic surveys of local public officials over time are (unfortunately) unusual in the field. Even with longitudinal data, changes in professionalism over time will be difficult to observe without further scale development, since the factor analysis approach used here does not lend itself well to this type of inquiry (hence Squire, 1992). Furthermore, the scale presented here makes use of original survey data, so replicating it in other contexts requires this kind of investment, at least until suitable measures are more readily available in administrative data sets. For these reasons, we view the present study as but a preliminary step toward greater understanding of local decision-making and hope that it might point other scholars in a useful direction in developing the relatively meager scholarly base concerning these important bodies.
References


### TABLE 1: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Obs</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Median Income of District (in $10,000s)</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>4.77</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>16.21</td>
</tr>
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<td>Per-Pupil Expenditures (in $1,000s)</td>
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<td>636.53</td>
</tr>
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<td>Unified (K-12) District</td>
<td>217</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent Nonwhite</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>Racial Heterogeneity Index</td>
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<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.23</td>
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<td>Variable</td>
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<td>Professionalism Factor with Board Member Training</td>
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<td>------------------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Factor Loadings</td>
<td>Uniqueness</td>
<td>Factor Loadings</td>
<td>Uniqueness</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Salary (in dollars)</td>
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<td>Hours in School Board Meetings (Monthly)</td>
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<td>0.81</td>
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<td>Hours on Other School Board Business (Monthly)</td>
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<td>0.40</td>
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Eigenvalue = 2.37  
Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.81$

Eigenvalue = 2.53  
Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.80$
## TABLE 3: PREDICTING LEVEL OF PROFESSIONALISM

<table>
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<th>Dependent variable:</th>
<th>Professionalism Factor</th>
<th>Professionalism Factor (with Training)</th>
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<td>(2)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>District Characteristics</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Median Household Income (in $10,000s)</td>
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<td>0.076***</td>
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<tr>
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<td>(0.020)</td>
<td>(0.022)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per-Pupil Expenditures (in $1,000s)</td>
<td>-0.017</td>
<td>-0.015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.010)</td>
<td>(0.011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>0.534***</td>
<td>0.539***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.135)</td>
<td>(0.145)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>0.187***</td>
<td>0.194**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.071)</td>
<td>(0.079)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enrollment Size (in 1,000s)</td>
<td>0.015***</td>
<td>0.015***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.003)</td>
<td>(0.003)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unified (K-12) District</td>
<td>0.523***</td>
<td>0.512***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>(0.073)</td>
<td>(0.082)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Nonwhite</td>
<td>0.206</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>(0.148)</td>
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<td>Racial Heterogeneity Index</td>
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<td>(0.189)</td>
<td>(0.192)</td>
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<td><strong>Board Characteristics</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Board Size</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(0.036)</td>
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<td>Faction Board Appointed</td>
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<td>(0.108)</td>
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<td>Holds single-member elections</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(0.087)</td>
<td>(0.087)</td>
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<td><strong>Constant</strong></td>
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<td>-1.014***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.147)</td>
<td>(0.223)</td>
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<td><strong>Observations</strong></td>
<td>213</td>
<td>212</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>R-squared</strong></td>
<td>0.648</td>
<td>0.647</td>
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Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.