



U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE FOUNDATION

Local School Boards and the Business Community:

AN INVITATION
TO ENGAGE

“BUSINESS LEADERS

—whether as individuals or operating through organizations such as local chambers of commerce, foundations, or public education funds — can PLAY A CRITICAL ROLE in supporting effective school board governance and reforms that improve student achievement.”

—U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation



SECTION 1:

Why Should the Business Community Engage in School District Governance?

School boards, elected or appointed by their communities, represent the community's beliefs and values. Who better than these community representatives to shoulder the responsibility for preparing children to live productive and satisfying lives?"

—National School Boards Association
www.nsba.org/about-us/what-school-boards-do



WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT THE LOCAL SCHOOL BOARD IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

Do you know the members of your school board?

Do you know if they are elected or appointed?

Have you been involved in a school board election?

Do you vote in your school board elections?

Have you attended a school board meeting?

▼
If you answered “NO” to any of these questions, it is time to take a closer look at what is going on in your school district.

Schools are the heart of a local community, and the decisions made by school boards affect not only the students and families directly involved, but the health of the whole city or town. The goal of any school system is to effectively prepare all students for success, so that graduates can become part of a skilled workforce that will attract businesses to and enhance economic vitality in the community.

Local school governance has routinely been left out of discussions about education, and school boards often function with little oversight from the communities they serve. Even those who are aware of the role school boards play often don't know how they can help. Yet, school boards have significant power and authority over the quality of education in our schools. They set the vision for closing the achievement gap and improving outcomes and, in most districts, are tasked with hiring a superintendent to carry out that vision.

School boards are also the entity responsible for adopting a fiscally sound budget that equitably distributes resources to schools and for engaging in collective bargaining agreements with teachers and union leaders. School boards are responsible for adopting a rigorous curriculum, ensuring that all students have access to quality instruction and Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate programs, and channeling resources to support partnerships with communities, among many other responsibilities.



The business community has a critical role to play in supporting the effective operation of local schools.

The business community has a critical role to play in supporting the effective operation of local schools. The expertise business leaders can offer in the key areas of school governance—budget and human capital management, as well as policy development and implementation—is essential to a high-functioning school district. If employers would like to improve outcomes and have a more prepared workforce, they must play larger roles within the system. Business leaders know, more than anyone, that systemic change and improvement come from the top.

Those unfamiliar with the operations of local school boards are often surprised to learn of the relatively low cost to engage, especially relative to the potential for impact school board members hold. This guide provides an overview of how school boards work and why business leaders should actively participate in local school governance, whether by running to serve on a board or supporting board operations in any number of ways.

SECTION 2: Who Serves on School Boards?

The role of community leaders in governing local schools was established hundreds of years ago in Massachusetts. As public schooling expanded in the early 1800s, the model shifted from local government control of schools to management by elected committees of local citizens. This model remains in place today and communities across the country select boards that range in size from a few to over a dozen members. The vast majority (88%) of school board members are elected; the remaining 12% are appointed.

DO YOU KNOW WHO SERVES ON YOUR LOCAL SCHOOL BOARD?

Is your school board representative of the demographics in your community?

Do any members of the business community serve on your school board?

Do your school board members seek out the perspectives of community members, including business leaders?

Does the business community seek out ways to engage with local school governance decisions and operations?

Given the role school boards play in managing budgetary, human capital, and policy decisions, board members should have specific areas of expertise to effectively serve. According to the 2018 National School Boards Association (NSBA) survey, current school board members rank the following areas of expertise as extremely important:

- Budget knowledge**
- Evaluation of superintendents and principals**
- Factors that impact student achievement, notably the following:**
 - High-quality leadership in the school building
 - Engaging and relevant curricula and learning opportunities
 - Aggressive recruitment strategies for qualified teachers

Business leaders are often familiar with budget operations and have experience with performance evaluations for personnel. Recruiting and empowering great leaders, providing the right resources and opportunities, and ensuring strong staffing are all critical to success in the workplace. This means representatives of the business community have tremendous expertise to offer their local school boards, and whatever gaps may initially exist in knowledge of specific district operations or curriculum can be overcome.

Further, school board members receive regular training to ensure they can most effectively serve the district. Training requirements are varied and depend on the state; however, most board members report that the entire board receives training twice a year.

Ensuring equitable outcomes for all students in a community has become an increased focus for school districts across the country. Unfortunately, equity gaps are prevalent in school board representation, and although school boards are becoming more diverse, they do not reflect the rapidly changing demographics of the P-12 student population:

Who are school board members?

The average age is **59** years old

78% are white

49% earn \$100,000 or more annually

40% are retired

24% are current or former members of an educators' union (up from 17% in 2010)

46% have advanced degrees (masters or doctorates)

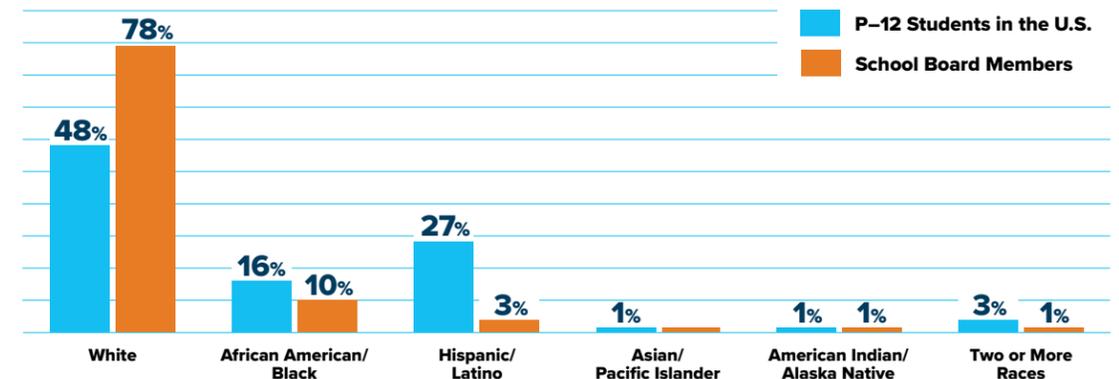
1 in 4 have experience working in education

Average board experience is **8.6** years; the median is 6 years.

Individual board members reflect the broad spectrum of political philosophies found across the general American public.

23% Progressive
21% Leaning progressive
17% Leaning conservative
19% Conservative

Student and School Board Member Demographics



Note: Seven percent of school board members preferred not to provide demographic information.

Business leaders can help encourage diverse representatives of the community to actively participate in school governance, either by running for the school board or by participating in other opportunities to share insights and feedback about how well the district is serving all students and the community at large.

Unless otherwise noted, all references come from the NSBA survey: https://cdn-files.nsba.org/s3fs-public/reports/K-12_Survey_Final_Single.pdf?BgOwe_V35bm1rsMgjSSGUx.439.5fVIs

SECTION 3:

What do School Boards do?

Local school boards hire district leadership, oversee school budgets, negotiate collective bargaining agreements or memoranda of understanding with teachers unions, and set policies on a wide range of issues. All of these decisions have real consequences for how effectively and efficiently school systems serve students and the public good.”

—U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation



WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT SCHOOL BOARD OPERATIONS?

Are you aware of the decisions school boards can make?

Do you know how much money your school district spends annually?

Does your school district have a balanced budget?

Is your school district hiring and developing high-quality educators?

Do you know if your school district is graduating students who will be prepared to enter college and the workforce?

Do you know how much time school board members spend on board activities?

Fundamentally, the job of an elected school board is to represent the interests of the community in school governance decisions.

School boards manage the operations of the district with varied duties across three major areas, each described in more detail below:

- ▶ **Budgeting**
- ▶ **Human Capital Management**
- ▶ **District Policy**

1. Budgeting

One of the key functions of the school board is to manage the district budget—often the most significant part of the budget for the entire community. District budgets in major cities run in the many billions of dollars; for example:

- New York City Public Schools: \$32.3 billion
- Los Angeles Unified School District: \$14.3 billion
- Chicago Public Schools: \$5.98 billion

Smaller cities and towns also maintain large school budgets relative to their size, often in the many millions of dollars. For example:

- Beaverton, Oregon: \$515 million
- Cedar Rapids, Iowa: \$276 million
- Scranton, Pennsylvania: \$166 million

Across the United States, average per-pupil spending in public schools is \$11,762 annually, and many states spend much more—for example, New York at \$22,366, the District of Columbia at \$19,159, Connecticut at \$18,958, and New Jersey at \$18,402.

Federal funding accounts for approximately 10% of a state’s education budget, while state and local funds make up the remaining 90%. Funds are distributed to districts based on each state’s funding formula, which generally falls into one of three categories:

- Appropriation based on student population characteristics
- Appropriation based on a calculation of resources needed by schools
- Appropriation based on the programs

Once districts receive funds, local school boards provide fiscal oversight by adopting and managing the budget and monitoring how funds are spent across schools.

Of board members surveyed in 2018, more than two-thirds report their local funding situation is extremely urgent, with 90% reporting it is extremely or very urgent. Some of the budget challenges boards are taking on include tackling decreases in state and federal funding, providing competitive salaries, and allocating adequate funding for school infrastructure needs.

District budget operations are also critical for addressing equity issues across local schools. While funding gaps are prevalent across states and districts, the Center for American Progress found that, among school spending inequities, more than 40% can be attributed to disparities within a school district. By examining spending and outcomes across schools, leaders can analyze how

SECTION 3: continued

effectively the budget is addressing student needs. Board members can work with principals and district leaders to explore what kinds of spending work best with different populations and in different contexts—say, an urban school with a high number of at-risk students or students with limited English proficiency.

The federal Every Student Succeeds Act, which governs K–12 education policy, requires states to report actual annual expenditures by schools starting by the 2019–2020 school year. These reporting requirements include salary and benefits, in addition to instructional costs and offers transparency into how resources are distributed within communities to better identify any inequitable spending or resource distribution.

2. Human Capital Management

School board members report that high-quality leadership at the school and district levels, as well as hiring and retaining qualified teachers, are among the most important approaches to improving student learning. They also reference the importance of having a workforce that can educate a diverse population of students and of addressing potential educator shortages.

One of the most important decisions a school board makes is hiring the best leader for the district.

Superintendents are key leaders of not just the schools, but the larger community. School boards also influence human capital policies for principals, teachers, and school staff. Business leaders are often well trained in developing performance evaluations based on objective data.

Effective boards set clear accountability targets for the district, which can be measured by quantitative data such as student achievement results, graduation rates, attendance figures, and budget dollars. If the superintendent does not make satisfactory progress on these indicators, the board is charged with finding a replacement. The board also maintains open communication with the superintendent and central office employees and works through issues that may arise. Boards and superintendents do not always see eye to eye, with boards focusing on the “bottom line” issue of budgets and performance, and superintendents working to manage concerns involving direct interaction with principals and teachers.

In districts where collective bargaining takes place, board members and representatives from the union, aided by the district’s counsel and management, are charged with negotiating contracts with teachers, school support personnel, and administrators. These negotiations can stretch over months or years and can be fraught with tension. Many business leaders are well positioned to offer guidance and work through thorny legal issues that arise from labor negotiations.

Many school board members are concerned parents, local civic leaders, or former school or district personnel, and lack experience managing personnel. Business leaders with experience in human resource management are well poised to support strong hiring practices and can bring informed approaches to recruiting, interviewing, and evaluating key district staff. Such leaders are also aware of the need for increasing diversity in leadership positions in the workforce and can help reinforce the importance of keeping equity at the center of hiring decisions.

3. District Policy

School boards set the vision for the district and are responsible for creating major policies across a wide range of areas—from instructional goals and tools to transportation and building management, to contract negotiations with the educator workforce. These are all areas in which business leaders have important experience and perspectives to offer, as businesses also set goals, establish plans to reach goals, and create policies and oversee their implementation.

The business perspective is critical in conversations about the district’s vision for what students must know to be prepared for success after high school. While states are responsible for setting academic standards, many local school boards select the district curriculum. Current board members rank the teaching of 21st century skills (e.g., critical thinking, collaboration, evaluating information for validity, ability to solve nonroutine

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problems) as a top priority. Although curriculum may not be an area of expertise for business leaders, board members can work with the district leader, as well as content and curriculum specialists, to vet curricula and choose the best instructional approach to ensure those 21st century skills are addressed.

Transportation and building infrastructure needs are complicated to manage, representing large budget line items that no individual school oversees. The board must negotiate capital purchases and upkeep and oversee the policies and procedures set in place for busing, building maintenance, and other daily district routines and needs. Here, business members offer significant experience in managing day-to-day operations and the policies that govern them.

SECTION 4: How do School Board Elections Work?

ARE YOU READY FOR THE NEXT SCHOOL BOARD ELECTION?

When is your next school board election?

How many board seats are up in the next election?

How much time and money are required to run or to support a candidate for the school board?

School board elections take place at different times and on different cycles across the country. For example, in 2018, 941 school board members were elected in 401 districts across 26 states. Boards often have half of the membership's seats up for election at one interval and the other half up at another interval within the terms. Some board members represent a specific sector of a city or town, while others are "at large," representing the entire community. Incumbency is also quite common, with many school board members serving multiple terms.

Running as or supporting a candidate for school board presents a prime opportunity for those interested in education advocacy to have an impact

Those unfamiliar with school board elections are often surprised by the relative ease and low cost of engagement. According to the 2018 National School Boards Association survey, 75% of respondents spent under \$1,000 on their most recent election and received contributions in the same range on average; local businesses contributed less than \$1,000. These respondents also report that winning the school board seat was not difficult; 71% characterized their victory as very or somewhat easy.

Running as or supporting a candidate for school board presents a prime opportunity for those interested in education advocacy to have an impact, as board elections require nowhere near the time, effort, or money that elections for mayor, state representative, or governor require.

SECTION 5: What are the Opportunities for Involvement?

"In many districts, major business leaders have withdrawn from public school affairs. ... This is a huge loss, for both the business community and the schools. Business leaders must support traditional public schools, which are a central institution in every community."

—Todd Collins, Vice President, Palo Alto Unified School District Board of Trustees,
<https://www.the74million.org/article/collins-the-humble-local-school-board-is-a-missing-link-in-improving-public-schools-3-ways-to-help-all-board-members-live-up-to-their-potential/>

HOW CAN LOCAL BUSINESS OWNERS SUPPORT THEIR SCHOOL BOARD?

How is the local business community currently engaging with your school board?

Will you consider running for school board or supporting strong candidates?

What professional advice or support can you offer to your school district?

Opportunities for members of the business community to engage with school boards range from running for a seat to supporting other candidates, to helping the elected board most effectively manage the district. The following are concrete actions that business leaders can take:

1. **Support competent individuals running for school board and/or consider running yourself.**

Serving on a local school board is a public service that requires time and dedication. The majority of current board members report that meetings occur twice per month, and members often engage in other activities that require additional time. Most board members are volunteers who receive no annual salary for board service or stipend for individual meetings.

SECTION 5: continued

While there is a time commitment and the service is usually unpaid, the opportunity to act as a community leader and add the business perspective to the school district's vision is extremely valuable.

Those interested in running for election or supporting a candidate should consider a thorough vetting process, which can be guided by the School Board Candidate Questionnaire provided as an appendix to this document. The Questionnaire is designed to ensure that school board candidates have both the competence and disposition to be agents of positive change.

Once a strong candidate has been identified, business leaders can offer financial support, share information about the cost of running a campaign, and help with local fundraising efforts. School board elections rely heavily on name recognition, so methods such as canvassing, yard signs, direct mail, and social media campaigns can all increase visibility. Leaders from the business community who have marketing experience represent a huge value-add for small campaigns.

Increasing election visibility can also highlight important issues faced by school districts. The low turnout at school board elections has allowed serious budgeting and personnel questions to fly under the radar in communities across the country. By making school board races competitive and accessible, the shortcomings of the status quo become much more obvious.

2. Participate in board training.

The business voice is often missing from formal training opportunities for school board members. Business leaders can volunteer to participate in or provide perspective on effective training so that board members develop governance skills to effectively support the district. This might include sharing expertise on the following:

- Workforce needs and the necessary conditions to support developing an educated workforce
- Managing budgets, accounting, and public finance
- Human resource policy, such as negotiating contracts
- Transportation and building infrastructure maintenance

3. Publicly support board members.

Ongoing support and involvement with the board is critical over time. Attention to the school board backs off after elections are over and citizens return to business as usual, and boards often operate with little input from or oversight by the community once elected. Most members receive their information from just a few sources, counting largely on the superintendent and state and national associations. However, interest groups such as unions continue supporting school board members throughout the year.

The business community has an important role to play in providing more perspectives to those who govern local schools

The business community has an important role to play in providing more perspectives to those who govern local schools and ensuring that the experiences of local business leaders, and their understanding of what employers need from new graduates, will be part of board discussions and decisions.

Sometimes, the board needs to make unpopular decisions to promote the interests of students. What many might consider to be trivial concerns—for example, the tenure of a high school's football coach or the book choice for a school's summer reading initiative—can explode into community-wide unrest.

Level-headed leaders can help calm controversial issues and refocus the board and the community on the important tasks at hand. They can reach out to members making tough decisions with words of appreciation, and publicly reinforce the difficult, but important, decisions that the members make.

4. Foster strong communications between the community and the board.

Business leaders understand how important it is to have transparent communications between employees and customers, and business leaders can help replicate this transparency between school boards and the communities they serve. Many school board meetings are sparsely attended by community members outside the system. The business community can help promote communications about board activities and decisions to the whole community through public forums. This also allows the board to hear more voices advocating for needed changes.

Blog, Twitter, and Facebook posts and YouTube videos can all perform the task of information dissemination. If local civic organizations or businesses have social media pages or accounts, they can include links to board activities, policies, and decisions. If board members know that active reporting on and discussion of their actions will occur, they are likely to be far more diligent.

Business leaders can also educate the community about important issues facing the district. Take, for example, the vexing problem of pensions. Few people around the country truly appreciate the depth and complexity of unfunded pension liabilities in state and municipal governments. For decades, politicians have been promising public employees defined-benefit pensions—that is, post-retirement income that is guaranteed and pegged to some percentage of their wages, usually in the final years of employment. Unfortunately, these politicians have not been contributing the necessary amount of money to the funds from which pensions are drawn. As a result, payments into these funds are squeezing already tight budgets. An organization of business leaders could be of great value in explaining to both the school board and the community the urgency of reforming these systems.

A CALL TO ACTION

Business leaders are important pillars of the local community who can advocate for the school conditions that students need to be successful. The opportunities described above provide leverage points for engagement with school governance.

While misperceptions sometimes exist about the real power school boards have and the pace of change that is possible within a local school district, the fact is that board members have a significant impact on decisions that impact the daily operations of schools. And while it is true that lasting, big-picture change takes time, having a seat at the table is critical to ensure changes are the right ones for students and the community.

AN INVITATION
TO ENGAGE

School Board Candidate Questionnaire

School boards play a unique role in school district governance and provide a venue for communities to have democratic input into local education decisions. Choosing the best available candidates is essential to creating a leadership body that not only holds high expectations for the achievement of all students, but also understands how to strategically set goals and execute policies to reach that vision.

During school board elections, candidates should demonstrate their knowledge of both the conditions that allow boards to be effective and the specific challenges facing their district. Below is a list of sample nonpartisan questions that voters, editorial boards, or other stakeholders can use to gauge the views and knowledge of school

board candidates. These questions, developed in consultation with national education governance and policy experts and school board veterans, can be included in a written questionnaire or asked at public forums. They are designed to be customizable for individual districts and communities, regardless of size or geography.

▼ **These questions, developed in consultation with national education governance and policy experts and school board veterans, can be included in a written questionnaire or asked at public forums.**

To make questions specific to a given district, stakeholders will need to prioritize them and may need to supplement them with details about their local community. Many online resources offer district-level data. School district and state government websites provide demographic information, as well as current data about school and district performance on a variety of education measures, such as state tests, absenteeism, and college and career readiness.

Some nonprofit organizations and third-party groups also offer information that can add context to the questions. Examples include Great Schools, which provides school- and district-level statistics and ratings (www.greatschools.org), and Achieving Tomorrow, which includes state-level achievement data (www.achievetomorrow.org). Voters can access these resources to prepare questions specific to their particular district, for example, by referencing local student achievement rates and equity gaps when asking about student achievement.

Interpreting a Response

WHEN SCHOOL BOARD CANDIDATES ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS, STRONG RESPONSES CAN BE DISTINGUISHED BY CERTAIN CHARACTERISTICS THAT REVEAL A DEPTH OF UNDERSTANDING OR EXPERIENCE

Quality Responses

are thorough and offer details and specificity that demonstrate deep knowledge. For topics in which the candidate may be less familiar with specific district functions, responses still show an understanding of how to get the information needed to make good decisions.

Weak Responses

are vague or noncommittal, or fail to demonstrate a grasp of facts and data relevant to the district and its students. These responses do not demonstrate an awareness of any lack of critical knowledge and the means by which to get more information when needed.

QUESTIONS

Governance, Finance, and Operations

- Here are the agendas for the past three school board meetings. Are these the right issues for the school board to be focusing on? If not, how would you change them?
- How can the school board prove itself accountable to citizens?
- What experience do you have with complicated budgets? When you are given a budget for the district that may be hundreds of pages long, what will be your process to determine if it is a good budget?
- How much of the district budget is spent on instructional services? Does that seem like the right proportion?
- What is the current per-pupil spending rate in the district? What does that mean?
- Do per-pupil spending practices align with district goals?
- Is the district using its resources equitably? Are students who need the most resources receiving them?
- Does your school board have the authority to raise taxes? If so, how will you approach decisions about tax increases? If not, how do you think the county board/taxing authority should make decisions about revenue? How should the school board work with the county board/taxing authority to facilitate this?
- How would you enlist support for bond issues or public-school spending from the community, especially considering voters with no children in the public schools?
- What are the district's greatest capital needs right now? How do you think those needs should be addressed?
- What are the district's greatest human resources needs right now? Do the local schools employ a workforce of highly qualified educators? If not, how will you help improve teacher workforce quality?
- What are three questions that you would ask a candidate for district superintendent? What would you hope to learn about the candidate from the responses?
- What do you know about charter schools and their mission? What is your experience with charter schools in this district? (For school boards that act as charter authorizers)

QUESTIONS

Performance, Outcomes, and Equity

- What has the district done well over the past five years? What has the district done poorly that you would change?
- To what degree are all students in this district on track for success after high school? How do you know? What changes do you suggest to the system to help those students who are not on track?
- Describe the achievement gap in this district. What causes it? What can be done to close it?
- Against what metrics will you assess district leadership's attainment of key goals? How will you know when a program or decision has been successful?
- How should superintendent and educator performance be measured? What are some of the challenges inherent in evaluating educators?
- In your past professional experience, what criteria did you use to make decisions about hiring people, retaining goods and services, or the effectiveness of a course of action? How will you use these criteria when making decisions as a school board member?
- Here are performance data from a few schools in the district (note: include traditional public and charter schools, where applicable). What do you see in these data and what do you think the board should do, if anything?

QUESTIONS

Independence of Thoughts and Actions

- As a school board member, from whom will you seek advice or input in weighing key decisions? What are the factors on which you will base your decisions?
- Whose interests should matter in the governance of a school district? In what ways should they matter?
- What civic, business, or advocate groups do you have connections with? What about their agenda appeals to you? Are there any issues on which you disagree with them?
- What are your views on open data and transparency of information? What kinds of school district information should be made public? What must be kept confidential?
- What specific steps would you take as a school board member to improve transparency and make school district information more widely available?
- Describe your experience with conflict resolution and consensus building.
- What is the role of the teachers association/union in this district? What about other stakeholder groups?
- Describe your view of the roles of the school board and the superintendent. What is the ideal relationship between these two offices?
- If a parent or a principal were to come to you regarding, for example, a facilities issue at a school campus or a situation involving a particular teacher, how do you see your role as a school board member in resolving that issue?
- How will you communicate your work to your constituents?
- You represent a specific part of the city—how will you balance the needs of your specific constituents with the needs of the overall school district? (Applies only to district vs. at-large candidates)

Endnotes

<https://nsba.org/About/Public-Education-FAQ>

https://cdn-files.nsba.org/s3fs-public/reports/K12_National_Survey.pdf?5XEOPBQlubbzr9x.8_5rFrBRugkHKS7N

https://achieve.lausd.net/cms/lib/CA01000043/Centricity/Domain/123/01_2019-20%20Superintendents%20Final%20Budget%20at%20a%20Glance%206.4.19.pdf

<https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1564586554/beavertonk12orus/imvnk9cu5p7fqhdapqo6/2019-20AdoptedBudget-Document-md.pdf>



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