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Eight Characteristics of Effective School Board

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- Board members possess detailed knowledge of their district, including initiatives to jump-start success.

- Board members have crafted a working relationship with superintendents, teachers, and administrators based on mutual respect, collegiality and a joint commitment to student success.

For the full list of eight characteristics of effective school boards, keep reading.

Background on the studies

Despite the pivotal role of school boards in the nation's educational framework, comparatively few studies focused on the practices and effectiveness of elected or appointed boards. As Sam Stringfield and Deborah Land noted in their 2002 study, *Educating At-Risk Students*, "quantitative and qualitative studies of board effectiveness are virtually non-existent," (Land and Stringfield, National Society for the Study of Education, 2002). Nonetheless, while there may be no magic bullet to assess boards comprised of individuals with divergent views, there is a consistent body of research examining the characteristics and practices of effective school boards. (For the purpose of this paper, effective boards are those operating in high-achieving districts, particularly those that are making significant strides despite serving large numbers of disadvantaged students.)

Much of the research cited here focuses on school board/district practices and approaches gleaned through interviews, surveys, observations and qualitative measures rather than in-depth quantitative information. Several studies also date back to the early 2000s or earlier; as a result, the data have limitations.

Nonetheless, the research base now includes notable studies comparing the practices of boards in high-achieving districts and contrasting those with practices of boards in lower-achieving districts. Several of these include detailed case studies exploring the evolution of districts from low performing to high achieving—a process that includes discussion of the school board role. In addition, scholars have used quantitative methods to assess the effect of district leadership on student achievement; often, this assessment includes data and trends related to school board operation, thus providing rich details on the evolu-

dozen studies covering more than 2,800 districts and 3.4 million students. Of the 27 studies examined, 14 had information about the relationship between district leadership and average student academic achievement.

Case Studies: Several studies on district leadership focus at least in part on board activities. e Learning First Alliance study, *Beyond Islands of Excellence*, (Togneri and Anderson, 2003), examined the practices in ve school districts with high student test scores despite moderate to high student poverty levels. Districts in the study were Aldine, Tex., Independent School District; Chula Vista, Calif., Elementary School District; Kent County Public Schools in Maryland; Minneapolis, Minn., Public Schools, and Providence, R.I., Public Schools.

Also, a study of 10 districts in ve states, *Getting ere from Here* (Goodman, Fulbright, and Zimmerman, 1997), sought to identify the e ect of quality governance on student achievement. Included in the analysis was an examination of the relationship between school board and superintendent and characteristics of e ective board leadership. Researchers selected the districts to re ect diversity in size, geography, student achievement, graduation rates, dropout rates, board/superintendent relations and race/ethnic factors.

Studies with Comparison Districts: One of the richest data sets available is the Lighthouse I study of the Iowa Association of School Boards (IASB). Looking at similar districts with either unusually high or unusually low records on student achievement, the project examined the role of boards and how they relate to student achievement. In studying Georgia districts, Lighthouse I contrasted the knowledge, beliefs, and actions of school board members from high- and low performing districts. Since conducting this original study in 1998-2000, IASB has expanded the project into an action research approach, identifying pilot

search: Past, Present and Future: School Board Leadership for Improving Student Achievement (Iowa School Boards Foundation, 2007) and in the omas Alsbury-edited *e Future of School Board Governance:*

sons for lack of student success. Board members o en focused on factors that they believed kept students from learning, such as poverty, lack of parental support, societal factors, or lack of motivation. Board members expected it would take years to see any improvements in student achievement. For these board members, the reasons for pursuing change o en were simple ones—to meet state mandates (and avoid sanctions) and a desire to not "have the lowest test scores" in the state.

In addition, board members in low-achieving districts o ered many negative comments about students and teachers when they were interviewed by Lighin.9 (ip -1.364 Td[(m)4 (em)10 (b)-9 TT8)3 (s)-7.9 (n)23 (y64 (em)10 (b)

ey never humiliate each other.   ey have no hidden agendas.   e goal is what is best for the children."

Boards held the superintendent and his or her colleagues accountable for progress but did not engage in the daily administration of schools. Explained one board member: "I am not a professional educator.… [e superintendent and her sta] are the professionals, and we say to them, '   ese are the results we want to see; you are in charge of how to do it.'"

Likewise, Snipes, Doolittle, and Herlihy's case studies (2002) include similar   nd-ings.   e groups concluded that fast-mov-ing districts had developed a consensus among board members and other leaders on the identi cation and implementation of improvement strategies.   is required a new role for the school board, which fo-cused on decisions "that support improved student achievement rather than on the day-to-day operations of the district."

In Lighthouse II (2007), researchers identi- ed   ve pilot school districts and provided technical assistance and support to the boards based on research   ndings docu-mented in Lighthouse I.

Results from this study also showed that districts made gains when they were able to focus on achievement rather than administrative issues. In the majority of districts, boards spent more than double the amount of time on policy and student achievement than they did prior to Lighthouse II. It was also common for these districts to schedule additional work sessions on student achievement. (More information on Lighthouse II is in the sidebar on the next page).

A DOZEN DANGER SIGNS

While this paper did not speci cally focus on charac-teristics of ine ective school boards, it may be helpful to review some of the descriptions of ine ective boards mentioned in the research:

1. Only vaguely aware of school improvement initia-tives, and seldom able to describe actions being taken to improve student learning

2. Focused on external pressures as the main reasons for

4. E ective school boards have a collaborative relationship with sta and the community and establish a strong communications structure to inform and engage both internal and external stakeholders in setting and achieving district goals.

 e Lighthouse I studies are particularly relevant in conveying this theme. Looking across high- and low-achieving districts in Georgia, school board members in high achieving districts had strong communication between the superintendent, sta , and each other. ey received information from many sources including the superintendent, curriculum director, principals, teachers, and sources outside the district. While the superintendent was a primary source of information, he or she was not the only source. In addition, ndings and research were shared among all board members. By comparison, in low-achieving districts, board members expressed concern that not all information was shared or shared equally. As a result, researchers said, "Some felt le out of the information ow."

In high-achieving districts, school board members could provide speci c examples of how they connected and listened to the community, and were able to identify con-crete ways they promoted this involvement. Likewise, sta members in these districts described the boards as supportive, noting that these public o cials "would respect and listen to them." In interviews, board members were quick to note how they com-municated actions and goals to sta . One strategy was to schedule post-board meet-ings to provide teachers and administrators with in-depth brie ngs on policy decisions.

By comparison, school boards in

CONVERTING RESEARCH TO ACTION: LIGHTHOUSE II

Building on the success of Lighthouse I—which iden-ti ed the di erent knowledge, beliefs and actions of school boards in high-achieving districts—the Iowa Association of School Boards expanded the initiative to begin embedding these ideas in other jurisdictions.

Under Lighthouse II, from 2002 to 2007, IASB identi ed ve pilot districts in Iowa and o ered technical assis-tance and support to the board, superintendent, and, at some sites, district leadership teams. The goal was to move entire districts from one set of assumptions, be-liefs and practices to another: the set possessed by the

low-achieving districts were likely to cite communication and outreach barriers.   ey were quick to describe a lack of parent interest in education; in fact, they were able to list only a few e   orts to solicit community involvement. Compared with board members from high-achieving districts, they frequently noted frustration with the lack of community involvement and said there was little they could do about it. As for relationships within the district, sta   members from the comparison low-achieving districts contacted for the research o   en said they didn't know the board members at all.

While such   ndings perhaps could be limited to high- and low-achieving districts in Georgia, other research highlights similar   ndings. Similar factors were evident in Waters and Marzano's 2006 meta-analysis of 27 studies. In this study, the authors found that high-achieving districts actively involved board members and community stakeholders in setting goals.

While individual board members did pursue their own issues, the researchers said, there was a reluctance to place these issues at center stage. "When individual board member interests and expectations distract from board-adopted achievement and instructional goals, they are not contributing to district success, but in fact, may be working in opposition to that end." School board members realized, the authors noted, that these issues can be a distraction from core district goals.

failed to support the school board's request for a tax increase, the board began a fundamental rethinking

from school to school. One example was in Sacramento, Calif., where teachers received at least 18 hours of in-service training per year based on uniform curricula. New teachers also received six full days of instructional training, and teachers had common planning periods to encourage collaboration on lesson plans and strategies to address student needs. In the Charlotte-Mecklenburg, N.C., schools, weeklong seminars for Advanced Placement teachers, leadership retreats for principals and nancial support for attaining national board certi cation were among e ective strategies by the district to improve curriculum.

Waters and Marzano (2006) also touts the importance of professional development. While not speci cally examining the school board role in this process, this study on leadership notes that "a meaningful commitment of funding must be dedicated to professional development for teachers and principals.   is professional development should be focused on building the knowledge, skills and competenci.9 (l)-5 ((ci)-3 (a)-564 TdF(c)-3 (.9

platform.   e di erences between the districts only increased over time, as boards and superintendents in high-achieving districts jointly re ned their visions over time, assessed district strengths and weaknesses and had all signs of a stable relationship. By comparison, less successful districts featured boards and superintendents that were not in alignment, as the superintendent "may develop solutions without board involvement." Such boards also may not hold superintendents accountable for goals.

8. E   ective school boards take part in team development and training, sometimes with their super-intendents, to build shared knowledge, values, and commitments for their improvement e   orts.

Board member development and training is a clear theme within this research base. In high-achieving Lighthouse I study districts (2001), school board members said they regularly participated in activities in which they learned together as a group.   ey cited frequent work and study sessions with opportunities for inquiry and discussion prior to making a   nal decision. In low-achieving districts, however, board members said they did not learn together except when the superintendent or other sta   members made

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sessions, school visits and even social events. As a result, the trustees had a "willingness to meet regularly with the professionals in the district to discuss what was happening and what should be happening." is commitment conveyed to sta the importance of district goals and the importance of the sta members' work in supporting them. In addition, they noted, " e successful boards did not just rely on district sta reports… ey obtained information about programs in di erent ways and from di erent sources, and sought opportunities to interact directly with administrators and teachers."

Related nding: Stability of leadership

In the 2002 Snipes et. al study, researchers noted that fast-moving districts had political and organizational stability, as evidenced by low rates of school board and superintendent turnover. Goodman's research echoed all of these points, concluding two characteristics of high achieving districts were long tenures by superintendents and school board members and regular retreats by senior sta and board members for evaluation and goal setting purposes.

Similarly, Togneri and Anderson (2003) note the long tenure of board members and superintendents in high-achieving districts. " ey set their courses and stayed with them for years," the study said. Among the ve successful districts pro led, superintendents in three districts had been at their jobs for at least eight years. In most of those pro led, the majority of board members had been serving in that capacity for 10 or more years. " at continuity allowed superintendents and boards to grow together in their approaches to change and to better understand each other's work."

Conclusion

During the past 15 years, a number of research studies have begun to document the value that school boards and their members add to the development of an e ective public education system. is edgling base of research provides a foundation for boards and other policymakers. e research also is timely, since it coincides with a period in U.S. public policy that has focused substantially greater attention on accountability

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