

Chapter 3
THE LOCAL SCHOOL BOARD:
A POSITIVE INFLUENCE ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT
*A Research Basis for Effective School Board Governance and Policy-Setting
and the Positive Role of Professional Development*

The Iowa Lighthouse Inquiry

The Iowa Association of School Boards, with the support of the National School Boards Association, has conducted ongoing research on effective school boards and their role in advancing student achievement. The studies have identified the characteristics of school boards with higher levels of student achievement and how they lead their districts toward high performance. The conclusion: School board actions are a key part of a “culture of improvement,” and school boards can create conditions that promote student learning.

“IASB’s Lighthouse Study School Boards and Student Achievement,” Iowa School Board Compass, Vol. V, No. 2, Fall 2000, © Iowa Association of School Boards, Des Moines, Iowa.

The Center of Public Education, the research arm of the National School Boards Association, conducted a meta-analysis of ten studies and reports on school board leadership, including several based on the Iowa Lighthouse Inquiry. The result is eight characteristics of effective school boards.

Effective School Boards...	
1.	Commit to a vision of high expectations for student achievement and quality instruction, and they define clear goals toward that vision
2.	Share strong beliefs about what is possible for students to achieve and their ability to learn, as well as the capability of the school system to teach all children at high levels.
3.	Are accountability-driven. They spend less time on operational issues and more time focused on policies to improve student achievement.
4.	Have a collaborative relationship with staff and the community and establish a strong communications structure to inform and engage both internal and external stakeholders in setting and achieving district goals.
5.	Are data savvy; they embrace and monitor data, even when the information is negative, and use data to drive continuous improvement.
6.	Align and sustain resources, such as professional development, to meet district goals.
7.	Lead as a united team with the superintendent, each from their respective roles, with strong collaboration and mutual trust.
8.	Participate in team development and training, sometimes with their superintendents, to build shared knowledge, values and commitment for their improvement efforts.
<p><small>“Eight characteristics of effective school boards,” © Center for Public Education, National School Boards Association, January 28, 2011. Accessed March 18, 2017 at http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Public-education/Eight-characteristics-of-effective-school-boards/Eight-characteristics-of-effective-school-boards.html.</small></p>	



In a paper presented to the American Educational Research Association, the Iowa Lighthouse Inquiry research team reported on the behaviors of the school board-superintendent team among districts with extreme differences in student achievement. The research not only provided key findings concerning the characteristics of effective school boards, but also differences in the behaviors of effective and less-effective boards.

“The Lighthouse Inquiry: School Board/Superintendent Team Behaviors in School Districts with Extreme Differences in Student Achievement,” Iowa Association of School Boards. A Paper Presented at the American Educational Research Association, April 10-14, 2001.

Attributes Shared by Effective School Boards

- *Peaceable relationship*—In all cases, the board/superintendent teams had fairly amicable relationships. Typically, board members in all studied districts said, “We disagree without making it personal.”
- *Board opinion of superintendent*—All boards were fairly well satisfied with their superintendents.
- *Caring about children*—While their specific behaviors and attitudes were remarkably different, in all cases the people interviewed appeared to care deeply about doing the right thing for children.

In identifying differences in attitude and behavior between “effective” and “less-effective” school boards, the researchers considered the Seven Conditions of Productive Change (or Renewal):

Seven Conditions of Productive Change	
1. Emphasis on building a human organizational system	
2. Ability to create and sustain initiatives	5. Support for schools through data/information
3. Supportive workplace for staff	6. Community involvement
4. Staff development	7. Integrated leadership

Key Differences in Attitude and Behavior

	'Effective' Boards	'Less-Effective' Boards
1.	<i>Elevating versus Accepting Belief Systems</i>	
	In higher-achieving school districts, the board-superintendent team and school personnel consistently expressed an “elevating” view of students. The school’s job was seen as releasing each student’s potential.	In the low-achieving districts, the board-superintendent team and school personnel accepted limitations in students and the school system.
	The board/superintendent team and school personnel in higher achieving districts viewed the school system critically and were constantly seeking opportunities to improve.	The board-superintendent team focused on managing the school environment, rather than changing or improving it.
	The social or economic conditions of homes and the community were seen as challenges in the quest to help all students succeed.	Students were seen as being limited by characteristics such as family income or home situation.
2.	<i>Focus on School Renewal</i>	
	In the high-achieving districts, school board members showed greater understanding and influence in each of the seven conditions for productive change.	In the low-achieving districts, board members were, as a whole, only vaguely aware of school improvement initiatives.
	Board members were knowledgeable about topics such as improvement goals, curriculum, instruction, assessment and staff development. They could give specific examples of how administrators and teachers carried out district goals.	Board members were sometimes aware of goals, but were seldom able to describe actions being taken by staff members to improve learning.
	Board members were able to clearly describe the purposes and processes of school improvement initiatives and identify the board's role in supporting those initiatives.	
3.	<i>Action in Buildings and Classrooms</i>	
	Generally, in the higher-achieving districts, central office administrators, principals and teachers confirmed that the board's knowledge and beliefs around the seven conditions for productive change were connected to action at the building and classroom levels.	In the low-achieving districts, these connections across the system were not discernible. There was little evidence of a pervasive focus on school renewal at any level when it was not present at the board level.
	Staff members could link building goals to board/district goals for student learning, and they could describe how those goals were having an impact in their classroom and other classrooms in the building.	
	Staff members identified clear goals for improvement, described how staff development supported the goals, and how they were monitoring progress based on data about student learning.	

The Importance of Goal Setting

In a 2006 study, researchers J. Timothy Waters, Ed.D, and Robert J. Marzano, Ph.D., emphasized the importance of setting goals related to student achievement and the need for a board to remain focused on advancing those goals.

Goals express the desired end-product for the district. They should be student-centered, aspirational in nature and positive and should include standards of performance.

– New Jersey School Boards Association

“The board ensures that these goals remain the top priorities in the district and that no other initiatives detract attention or resources from accomplishing these goals,” they wrote.

Waters, J.T., and Marzano, R., *School District Leadership That Works: The Effect of Superintendent Leadership on Student Achievement: Meta-analysis of Influence of District Administrators on Student Achievement*. 2006. Denver, CO: Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning. Accessed March 18, 2017 at <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED494270.pdf>.

Goals are expressions of the desired end-products for the district, student-centered, aspirational in nature, and positive; they should include qualitative standards of performance, according to materials produced by the NJSBA Field Services Department, which provides onsite consultation to local school board on goal-setting.

The goal-setting process should result in SMART (Specific, Measureable, Attainable, Recognizing resources needed for achievement, and Time-related) objectives. And the process should determine a method to evaluate progress and measure attainment.

The Importance of Professional Development

Based on its review of the Iowa Lighthouse Inquiry and other research, the Task Force on Student Achievement believes that training and professional development establish the foundation for board of education teams and individual members to meet their responsibilities. In addition, the Task Force believes that it is the responsibility of the New Jersey School Boards Association to identify areas that need to be addressed through professional development and to develop, facilitate, and implement these training opportunities for its members.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter 3 – The Local School Board: A Positive Influence on Student Achievement

FOR LOCAL BOARDS OF EDUCATION:

12. Ensure that every board decision considers the academic, social and health needs of students and that the community is aware of this belief. At all regular meetings, board members/trustees must affirm this priority. Every decision—from the adoption of curriculum to the colors of classroom walls—should be founded on the question: *“What is best for all children?”*
13. Participate in professional development individually and as a board team to develop a comprehensive understanding of the Iowa Lighthouse Inquiry, the Center for Public Education’s research on the *Eight Characteristics of Effective School Boards*, and the role of the board of education in student achievement.
14. Through training and board practice, ensure that all members understand existing data about student achievement and that all reports to the board regularly use data related to students and their academic progress.
15. Conduct a self-assessment to determine the status of the board’s governance practices including the use of data in respect to student achievement.
16. Conduct a thorough policy review that includes the potential impact of each specific policy on contributing towards student achievement for all in a safe, healthy climate. All school boards should review their policies *through the lens of student achievement* to ensure that they support, and do not discourage, achievement for all.

FOR SCHOOL DISTRICTS:

17. Make certain that classrooms are engaging places for young people to spend their days and that high expectations characterize all staff interaction with students.
18. Implement an annual goal-setting process that is student-focused and includes measurable standards of achievement.
19. Keep all stakeholders updated on challenges and successes. The administration should develop a communications plan to inform the community of the challenges the district is facing and to engage citizens in helping meet those challenges.
20. Establish a procedure to be followed when introducing new programs or practices. The procedure should include expectations for struggling students and a process to evaluate

short-term and long-term progress. The evaluation process would help the administration and board determine if the program should continue.

FOR INDIVIDUAL SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS:

21. Seek leadership and support from those who believe that the board's priority goal should be advancing the achievement of every student.
22. Be prepared to ask questions at every meeting about how policies and procedures influence the success of struggling students.
23. Participate in the Annual NJSBA Workshop, which places the achievement of all students as its highest priority.

FOR THE NEW JERSEY SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION:

24. Through training and professional development, ensure that board members/trustees understand, and are able to communicate about, measures of student achievement including educational standards, summative and formative assessments, and local school district goal-setting.
25. Provide all boards of education and individual board members with comprehensive professional development on the key findings of the Iowa Lighthouse Inquiry concerning effective governance.
26. Through training and professional development, emphasize that the primary responsibility of board members/trustees is to ensure that the district provides a comprehensive program that prepares students to be ready to enter the workforce or pursue post-secondary education. By their actions, board members/trustees must communicate to their constituents that all board business has a focus on the achievement of all students regardless of zip code or economic circumstances.
27. Build public understanding of the nature and measures of student achievement, while correcting common misconceptions—for example, the idea that some students are incapable of learning difficult subjects.
28. Review all Association policies to assess their potential impact on contributing toward student achievement and safe and healthy school climate. (Recommended revisions and additions to the New Jersey School Boards Association's *Manual of Policies and Positions on Education* are listed in Chapter 11 of this report.)