

How School Boards Influence Student Achievement

By Ivan Lorentzen, Ed.D.

How a school board's actions can influence a school district's student academic achievement has been hinted at for many years. A recent study¹ of Montana school boards reported statistically significant, quantifiable data that identify a relationship between school board actions and student achievement.

The study examined the behavior and practices of school boards and compared those with the academic achievement levels of their school districts. School board members were questioned using a Board Self-Assessment Survey developed by the Washington State School Directors' Association. This online survey generated a "boardsmanship score" for each district. Each numerical score was then correlated with the school district's student achievement scores, as generated by Montana's Criterion Reference Test for 10-graders in reading, math, and science.

One of the board's primary tasks is to agree on the role of the board for how to most effectively govern the district.

Numerous statistically significant relationships were found. What became clear is that boards that govern districts with high student achievement scores behave quite differently from boards that govern districts with low student achievement scores. More specifically, the practices of effective boardsmanship, as detailed by the assessment, have a strong correlation with high student achievement.

The findings challenge the traditional assumption that teachers and administrators play the key role in influencing student achievement, while school boards concern themselves with budgets, policy, and personnel matters—issues with only a peripheral role on the education process. Instead, the study suggests that, to improve student

academic achievement, all of a school district's resources must be aligned behind the instructional effort—and the school board is a powerful influence in creating that alignment. There are numerous actions a school board can take, or fail to take, that either facilitate or sabotage the best efforts of teachers and administrators. Each of these are outlined in the Washington School Board Standards, available at www.wssda.org.

Among the specific actions practiced by school boards in high-performing districts:

- (a) holding the district accountable for meeting student learning expectations by evaluating the superintendent on clear and focused expectations,
- (b) setting and communicating high expectations for student learning with clear goals and plans for meeting those expectations,
- (c) committing to continuous improvement in student achievement,
- (d) providing responsible school district governance by conducting board and district business in a fair, respectful and responsible manner,
- (e) engaging the local community and representing the values and expectations they hold for their schools,
- (f) working together as an effective and collaborative team, and
- (g) creating conditions district-wide for student and staff success by providing for such learning essentials as a rigorous curriculum, technology, and high-quality facilities.

Each of the above practices is defined by specific tasks the school board would need to accomplish.

The study made clear that there are practices that school boards should avoid, including: (a) micromanagement, (b) abdicating to the administration, and (c) making unrealistic demands on administration and staff.

Another observation focused on the damaging effects of what can be described as “disarray.” This refers to the wide variation of opinions between individual board members with regard to how a school board should operate. Board members who are “on the same page” with regard to boardsmanship (i.e. low disarray) pull the district in the same direction and govern districts with higher student achievement scores. Board members who hold very different ideas about boardsmanship (i.e. high disarray) pull the district in different directions and govern districts with lower student achievement scores. In this case, the data and common sense align. Thus, one of the board’s primary and most difficult tasks is to collectively agree on the role of the board regarding how to most effectively govern the district.

Finally, the ability of school boards to prioritize—to keep academics at the forefront of their efforts—is key. As Paul Houston, former executive director of the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), once wrote that school boards need to prioritize how they spend their time. Boards should avoid focusing on the “Killer B’s”—in other words, they must not spend too much time discussing busses, buildings, books, budgets, basketball, and bonds. Instead, they need to focus on the “critical C’s”—connections, communication, collaboration, community building, child advocacy, and curricular choices².

References

¹ Lorentzen, I. (2013). *The relationship between school board governance behaviors and student achievement scores*. Doctoral dissertation: The University of Montana, 2013.

² Houston, P. (2001). Superintendents for the 21st century: It’s not just a job, it’s a calling. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 82, 429-433.

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